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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' WRITING ABILITY IN ENGLISH  
AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN SYRIA**

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## SUMMARY

This research concerns the development of Syrian undergraduates' writing ability in English. The aim of the research was to establish whether students' writing improved during their period of study, and to identify the nature of any changes that occurred. Secondary objectives concerned how previous research and current theories can help us understand and offer explanations for progress or lack of progress. In addition, students were consulted about their attitudes to writing through a questionnaire and interviews. Written data was obtained by sampling first and final year examination scripts, which were (1) objectively analysed for linguistic features to establish measurable characteristics and (2) subjectively evaluated by native speaker teachers of English to take account of factors such as discourse structure and organisation.

The thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 describes the setting of the current research. Chapter 2 describes the data collection and introduces research methods, and this followed in Chapter 3 by a survey of relevant literature on non-native speaker writing. The main body of the linguistic research is reported in Chapter 4 (sentence length and syntactic structure), Chapter 5 (grammatical features and spelling) and Chapter 6 (lexis). The subjective assessment of samples of student writing by native teachers of English is reported in Chapter 7, and the results of the survey into students' attitudes to writing are also reported in Chapter 8. Chapter Nine concludes the thesis with a summary of the findings, implications for teaching and suggestions for further research. The analyses revealed improvements in almost all aspects of students' writing on both objective and subjective measures but particularly in syntactic complexity and vocabulary.

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Also, I should mention here with great appreciation Professor Leech, who taught me pedagogic grammar on my M. A. course at University of Lancaster, for providing me a printed copy of the Spoken English Corpus, which is used for comparison with the current research regarding the use of relative pronouns.

Finally, I would like to thank Aleppo University and the Department of English, without whose help and trust in me I would never have had the opportunity to carry out and complete this research.



## **DEDICATION**

To my father, whom I lost when I was four years old,

To my mother, who suffered a lot in bringing us up,

To my two brothers,

To my only sister,

To my wife and son,

To all people mentioned above whose love and blessings were a constant source of  
support.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Current Research and its Setting**

### **1.1 The Present research**

This section introduces the scope of the current study and its objectives and describes the educational context of the research.

#### **1.1.1 The aims and scope of the study**

The present study concerns the development of students' writing ability at different stages of their undergraduate studies at the *Department of English in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Aleppo University*. There are reasons behind this choice. The Department of English was chosen basically because it is the place where writing in English (in the sense of creating an extended text) is practised more frequently than in any other department in the University. Further, unlike the other departments, English is the medium of instruction in the Department of English. Added to this, the exam questions in the other departments only require the students to answer, even when English, in very short answers, which would not provide good data for analysis.

The reasons behind choosing writing are as follows:

- (1) Writing in English is of special concern all over the world. In the last two decades research on various aspects of writing in English has increased, but still little is known about the strengths and weaknesses of students in Syria.
- (2) There is a general wish on the part of those who are teaching English in Syrian universities to investigate this activity in more depth with the aim of understanding how to improve students' writing ability.
- (3) Previous research in second language writing (see 3.4) indicates that learners in a second language context have some problems in writing in an academic context, which deserves more investigation.
- (4) Examining writing in more detail should hopefully yield important insights that might help in the development of the teaching English in general and writing in particular. My own personal experience as an assistant lecturer of English at the Department of English for five years, from 1986-1991, led me to believe that there was room for improvement in the teaching of writing in this academic context.

Tracing the development of students' writing ability at different stages of their studies will demonstrate possible areas of difficulty the students have.

It seems reasonable to suppose that as the students study longer, they should be able to write longer and more accurate sentences. Furthermore, students should display signs of development by having a wider range of vocabulary on the one hand, and better skills at the discourse and rhetorical levels on the other hand. To put it differently, we would expect that the writing of fourth year students should demonstrate improvement at different levels (grammatical, organisational and discursal) from when they were in first year. The current research seeks to test whether or not this is so.

### **1.1. 2 Research questions**

This research addresses the following research questions:

- (1) Does the students' writing ability develop during the period of their studies or not?
- (2) If yes, which aspects of writing (grammar, vocabulary, organization and so on), display signs of development?
- (3) What are the identifiable difficulties or problems the students in the Department of English in Syria encounter in their writing?

In addition to the main research questions, the thesis attempts to offer explanations and reasons relating to current theory for areas of difficulty and to consider the implications of the findings for teaching.

### **1.2 The research setting**

Syria has four universities, one of which is Aleppo, the university where the present research is based. Aleppo, the city, is situated in the Northeast of Syria, and the university lies in the western part of the city.

In terms of importance and size, Aleppo University, which was established in 1958, comes the second in the country after Damascus University, and the modern

foundation dates from the time of independence in 1946. The university occupies an attractive campus where rural and urban aspects are mapped together in harmony. The student population in the university is approximately 50, 000, with most students in the Faculty of Law and Faculty of Arts, although most major disciplines are represented in the university, which also has faculties of Engineering and Medicine.

Below is a brief description of the Faculty of Arts in terms of staff and students, the departments and the degrees the faculty offers, with special emphasis on the Department of English, the context of the current study.

### **1.2.1 Faculty of Arts**

The Faculty of Arts was founded in 1966 under the name The Faculty of Languages, which was modified twice: first to the Faculty of Arts in 1971; second to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in 1982. It is composed of three Departments. These are (listed according to the date of establishment):

1. Department of Arabic 1966-1967
2. Department of French 1967-1968
3. Department of English 1969-1970

The number of students in the Faculty is approximately 8,000, distributed as follows: Department of Arabic 3,500, Department of English 3,000 and Department of French 1,500. Other relevant departments, launched in the 80s, are the Departments of Education and Psychology.

The Faculty offers degrees and various higher diplomas in English, Arabic and French. All degrees are rated according to a five-category scale as follows (the full mark is 100; 50 is the pass mark):

from 50-59 accepted

from 60-69 good

from 70-79 very good

from 80-89 distinction

from 90-100 honours

### 1.2.2 Department of English

In terms of importance and size, the Department of English comes second after the Department of Arabic. The period of study for a degree is four years (as is the case in the other Departments), based on two semesters per year (Semester One from September till December, Semester Two from February till May). To graduate from the Department of English, the students need to complete successfully four years (eight semesters) of study.

The students admitted to the Department of English, roughly speaking, have a similar background as far as exposure to learning English is concerned. They have all studied the language for six years. Nevertheless, two categories of students can be noticed: (1) those with a literary studies orientation and (2) those with a scientific study orientation. The former category is admitted to the Department either on their marks in the English examinations at the end of their secondary school, or their total score in the Final Exam of the Syrian Certificate of Secondary Education. The second category is admitted only on their marks in the English examination.

The courses offered in the Department of English over the four years are as follows:

#### **First Year:**

##### **Term One**

English Language (1)  
Composition and Comprehension (1)  
The Novel  
Poetry  
Translation  
Arabic  
National Education  
**A total of 13 courses**

##### **Term Two**

English Language (2)  
Composition and Comprehension (2)  
Drama  
Short Stories  
Second European Language  
Arabic

#### **Second Year**

##### **Term One**

English Language (3)  
Composition and Comprehension (3)  
Drama in the Restoration Period  
Poetry in the Restoration Period  
Second European Language

##### **Term Two**

English Language (4)  
Composition and Comprehension (4)  
The Novel up to the 18 Century  
Shakespeare  
Translation

Arabic

Arabic

National Education

**A total of 13 courses**

### **Third Year**

#### **Term One**

English Language (5)  
Composition (1)  
Poetry in the Victorian Age  
History of Literature and Thought  
American Literature  
Second European Language  
Arabic

**A total of 14 courses**

#### **Term Two**

English Language (6)  
Composition (2)  
Translation  
Shakespeare and Drama  
The Novel in the 19 Century  
Literary Criticism  
Arabic

### **Fourth Year**

#### **Term One**

English Language (7)  
Literary Criticism  
Poetry in the Modern Age  
Literary Composition  
Comparative Literature (1)  
Arabic

**A total of 12 courses**

#### **Term Two**

English Language (8)  
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Translation  
Comparative Literature (2)  
Arabic

The total courses in the period of study are 52 courses and in order to graduate, the students should successfully complete all these courses. A complete list of the course books with their authors is given in Appendix 1.

It will be seen that students are given courses in 'composition' or 'composition and comprehension' for 3 of 4 years. Starting at paragraph level, the courses gradually introduce essay writing in a literary mode.

### **1.3. English taught in Syria**

This section outlines the stages in which English is, formally speaking, taught in Syria.

### 1.3.1 Schools

Students are taught English from the age twelve, in their preparatory schools, until eighteen in their secondary schools up to the time when they go to the university, for six hours a week. This means that they study English for six years before they are admitted to the university. But in the last three years the government has introduced a new policy, which is that English is to be taught from the age of ten.

English is taught as a secondary subject just like chemistry, history and biology. The mark required for success in the exam is 40% of the total mark.

At this stage the English taught is very basic, where the emphasis is given to learning vocabulary and grammar. The text books for the first three years are prepared by the Ministry of Education in Syria. Their content is chosen to be related and relevant to the Arabic history and culture; whereas in the secondary schools the text books contain excerpts of texts from different sources, with literary and scientific orientations to the English-speaking culture.

Three further points of difference between the text books in the preparatory and secondary schools can be mentioned. First, in the former the text books do not have separate grammar sections as it is the case in the latter, where a separate section is devoted to grammar exercises such as tenses, co-ordination, the passive and conditional clauses. Second, some poetry is included in secondary school text books, and in addition to the reading texts, there are story books such as “A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens.

No continuous writing in English is taught in schools in Syria and students have no opportunity to practice writing above sentence level until they enter university.

Regarding the use of L1 in English classes at primary and secondary levels, it is highly recommended by the supervisors of English in the Ministry of Education in Syria not to use Arabic or to use it very sparingly. However, Arabic is very often used in those contexts. This use of L1 increases in situations that are short of teaching materials such as flash cards or wall pictures; in such contexts teachers find themselves obliged

to use L1 to maintain interaction between them and students; otherwise breakdowns in communication are apt to occur.

After secondary school, students either leave formal education or go on to institutes or universities.

### **1.3.2 Institutes**

The period of study in the institutes is two years. These institutes in most cases are vocational such as Institutes of branches of engineering and medicine. However there are a few educational institutes which prepare assistant teachers for the primary and preparatory levels. Regarding the teaching of English, we can distinguish between two kinds of institutes: one where English is taught as a secondary subject for 2 hours per week and one where English is taught as the main subject for 30 hours per week; here English is the medium of instruction.

Some of the courses taught in these institutes have similarities with the courses in the Department of English.

### **1.3.3 Universities**

In all faculties and departments, except the Department of English, English is taught as a secondary subject for 2 or 4 hours a week throughout the period of their study (4 or 5 years), and Arabic is the means of instruction. To pass the examination in English students need a score of 50%.

The faculties in Aleppo University can be classified in two groups: those with literary oriented studies such as the Faculty of Law and Faculty of Commerce, and those with scientific oriented studies such as Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Science. Both groups take fairly general courses for two years, using such books as Headway and Reading and Thinking in English.

### **1.3.4 The Department of English**

Unlike the other Departments in the Syrian Universities where Arabic is the medium of instruction, in the Department of English the medium of instruction is English, except for two courses: Arabic and National Education. The policy of the Department of English is to create a balance between the literary and linguistic courses taught in the Department. But, in fact, more emphasis is devoted to the literary ones.

The time given to the teaching of English in the Department of English can be summarised as follows:

First Year: 20 hours plus 6 hours of seminars, with a total of 26 hours in Semester one; 16 hours plus 6 hours of seminars, with a total of 22 hours in Semester two.

Second Year: 16 hours plus 6 hours of seminars, with a total of 22 hours in Semester one, 20 hours plus 6 hours of seminars with a total of 26 hours in Semester two.

Third Year: 20 hours plus 4 hours of seminars, with a total of 24 hours in Semester, one and two.

Fourth Year: The same as Third year.

### **1.3.5 The English Language Advisory Centre**

The Advisory Centre was launched in 1983 with the help of the British Council. It is provided with a library, video room and a modern Language Laboratory. The Centre basically runs three different courses: (1) 'general' for those who are graduates from the department of English, (2) 'concentrated' for non-specialist MA students who want to pursue their higher studies, PhD for instance and (3) 'specialised' for those who are interested in improving their proficiency in the use of language in their special fields such as Medicine, Engineering and Commerce. Some students from the Department of English make use of the library and attend supporting courses in this 'centre.

## **1.4 Reading in the Department of English**

Reading, it is claimed, is closely related to writing; any improvement in either of them will affect, directly or indirectly, to lesser or greater degrees, the other. It is not surprising, therefore, if reading is emphasised in the department of English. Students



in this department are expected to read a lot in English. For instance, the students in this department are expected to read over their period of study at least 100 set books, and added to this is other reading suggested by their tutors. Reading in English covers a range of genres such as drama, novels, poetry, grammar and literary criticism, newspapers and magazines.

Moreover, in a second language context, students are also expected to read to various degrees in their native language, including poetry, novels, newspapers and magazines.

### **1.5 Writing in The Department of English**

In this section the importance of writing, the types of writing and length of writing are summarized.

#### **1.5.1 The importance of writing**

Since it is by writing examinations that the students' success or failure is assessed, writing plays a decisive part in students' lives and in the long run in their future. Students try their best to improve their writing in order to pass the written exam. This can be clearly noticed especially when the exam approaches when the students are busy writing sample answers to be corrected by their teachers. This focus on written English creates a mismatch between the oral and written skills of the students. One might find cases of students whose writing is fairly good, while their spoken English is relatively poor. Because of the large number of students ( 100-300), oral examining is difficult, if not impossible, and some students have very few chances to practise oral English. For most students, spoken English skills are, in reality, likely to be of less use than reading and writing skills since they may not ever have the opportunity to travel to non-Arabic speaking countries.

#### **1.5.2 Types of writing activities**

In the Department of English the students practise a variety of written forms, which can be grouped as follows: **(a)** writing required by the teachers and graded in the long run and **(b)** writing practised by the students, but not graded by the tutors.

Under assessed work **(a)** (examinations answers are of course included below), the following types of writing can be listed:

- **writing short answers such as “defining” or “giving an example”**
- **writing a paragraph**
- **writing an essay**
- **writing a seminar paper**

Under personal writing **(b)**, on the other hand, the following types of writing can be listed:

- **Note- taking from lectures**
- **Summaries and notes from written texts**
- **Writing composition**
- **Writing sample answers for examination practice**
- **Diaries**
- **Poetry or short stories** (usually tentative attempts)

### **1.5.3 Length of writing**

Writing under exam conditions in the Department of English is limited in length by almost all teachers. In the exam, first year students, for example, are told to answer their exam question in not more than 20 lines or 200 words. This is partially due to the large classes in the department of English (1000 to 1500 students in Year 1).

Therefore, for practical reasons, teachers in this department tend to set word limits so that they will not have to mark large amounts of writing, a task that appears impossible within the time available, taking into account that many teachers teach more than one class and subject, meaning that a teacher might be required to mark between 2000 and 3000 exam scripts, which is a heavy burden that might affect the process of evaluation. The restriction on length in examination is reflected in work throughout the course and this clearly means that the students lack experience in extensive writing. The only longer pieces of work that they write are seminar papers, which they submit for certain courses, which vary from year to year. The seminar paper is prepared for presentation orally at the seminar group, but not all papers are presented. Others are discussed with tutors. They count for 20% of the course mark.

## **1.6 The students in the Department of English**

This section is divided in two parts: (1) the students' educational background, (2) their motivation and their expected careers.

### **1.6.1 The students' educational background**

As mentioned above in this chapter, students join the Department of English , in most cases after six years exposure to English at preparatory and secondary schools in Syria. The students share more or less the same educational background as far as English is concerned.

Attending lectures in the Department of English is basically optional, except for the case of the courses which have seminar papers, where attendance becomes obligatory; by default since otherwise the students are not able to submit them.

Since attendance in this department is not compulsory, students often have a part-time job (teaching English classes hours at primary levels or working in an office, 15 hours per week for instance), and in some cases a full time job as is the case with those students who have completed a post secondary school course in an institute. The schedule of English classes in this department is arranged in such a way as to give those who have some work the chance to attend. The classes are either in the morning (from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.) or in the late afternoon (from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m.).

Some students rarely attend lectures except just before taking the final examinations.

### **1.6.2 Their motivation and careers**

Generally speaking, the majority of students who study in this Department are instrumentally motivated to learn English; this situation, I assume, is a common one in most countries where English is taught as a SL or FL. English is looked at as a means of improving the students' economic position or perhaps, for some women, as a social ladder. We might group students regarding the motivating forces behind their learning English as follows: the majority of students learn English to become teachers of English in Syria or outside Syria, for instance in the gulf countries where English teachers are badly needed. Other students learn English to get good jobs, as

translators for instance, in the private sector since modern technology is written in English. Still others learn English to pursue their higher studies, PhD level, for example, in an English speaking country.

After graduating from the Department of English, the majority of students, work as teachers of English, either in private schools or in schools run by the government; this might be influenced by the fact that the teacher, in particular the teacher of English, has high social prestige in Syria. Teachers are associated with messengers or prophets, highly respected and admired. People feel greatly indebted towards those who teach them. Further, there is an understanding that scientists, doctors of medicine and engineers, who play an important role in society, were themselves students at one time, and they are the output of teachers.

Some students get employment in companies as translators or as correspondents, writing letters, contracts, faxes or telexes. Still some students, but few, are inspired to continue their higher education abroad, with the ultimate end of getting better jobs in the future.

However there is a need, which is felt on the part of the staff in this department, to implement in our students a sense of awareness that not only has English an economic advantage but also it has a tangible benefit to them as human beings.

### **1.7 University examinations**

Examinations, it is claimed in Syria, are the backbone of the educational system. Further, it might be fair to say that the educational system could not flourish, so to speak, without examinations, since they are a mirror by which the system can benefit by seeing which aspects of the system need modification or support. Moreover, examinations, in particular the written, are considered the most decisive and important stage of the academic year since they are the means by which, in the long run, the students' futures are determined. Therefore, special care and emphasis is given to university examinations, where all those who are involved directly or

indirectly in the process of teaching and learning such as teachers and administrators are doing their best to make the examinations successful and fruitful.

The period of the exam covers approximately a month every semester. The time allotted for all exams in the Department is three hours. It is considered that this time gives the students a fair chance to answer the exam questions properly. The total mark for every exam is one hundred, and the minimum pass mark is 50% in all courses.

Exam questions in English are usually a combination of two types: objective questions consisting of the cloze type, which requires students to fill in spaces, or multiple choice items, and the essay type which requires students to write essays on a certain topic, or answer questions in the form of an essay.

For reasons of increasing objectivity and reliability students' names and seat numbers are hidden on the answer papers and they are disclosed only after the papers have been rated by examiners, who are the teachers of the Department.

### **1.8 Teaching methodology**

The curriculum policy of teaching English in this department is to strike a balance among the language skills namely, speaking, listening, reading and writing. But due to the large number of students and the shortage of basic language facilities such as a language laboratory, videos and computers, a mismatch between the language skills has been created and some skills, writing and reading for instance, have been given more emphasis than others.

Roughly speaking, the most dominant mode of delivering information in the Department of English is the lecture, which has been proven to be more manageable than the other types. The practical reasons behind this are that the large size of classes, shortage of teaching equipment and the physical construction of classrooms all make other types such as group work or pair work activities difficult, if not

impossible to use in such situations. Nevertheless, pair or group work activities are sometimes practised in seminars because there are fewer students there.

However, students are given opportunities to discuss anything they like outside classrooms, in staff offices for instance. The majority of tutors assign offices hours (2-4 a week) to answer or discuss any inquiries made by the students about their courses. These small conferences, it seems to me, are very useful for students, in particular those who feel embarrassed during the lecture or those who had not the chance to discuss issues because of the large size of classes. These informal contacts between tutors and students, further, help students to improve their spoken and written skills in the language at the same time.

Regarding the use of Arabic in this department, it is recommended that English is to be used, except in translation classes.

### **1.9 Summary**

This chapter introduced the aims and scope of the current research, and provided background information about the research setting of the present research. This included general information about Aleppo University, the Faculty of Arts and the Department of English, a review of the undergraduate courses at this Department, and a brief account of the general requirements for the university study in the Department of English.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Data Collection and Methodology**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents an outline of the process of data collection and research methods. The data was collected from the Department of English in the University of Aleppo in Syria during October, November and December 1994, with the permission of the university administration.

Many researchers, Alderson and Beretta (1992) for example, have recommended using different methods of data collection in research, claiming that a multi-method approach increases the validity and reliability of the findings. The current study lends itself to a multi-method approach because it is important to look at writing development from different perspectives. The data collected falls into 3 categories:

1. Samples of students' writing at two different levels.
2. A survey of students' attitudes to writing, using a questionnaire and interviews.
3. Native speakers' subjective assessment of students' writing ability.

### **2.2 Samples of students' writing**

The subjects of the current research are 30 students, who studied English Literature and Language for four years, namely 1989-1992. Scripts of students' writing produced by the same subjects but at different stages of their university learning (30 exam scripts for each year) were collected. The exam scripts had been rated by teachers at Aleppo university. These exam scripts, which comprise the major source of data, consisted of students' writing in the courses Composition and World Literature, as follows:

- **First Year: 30 exam scripts of Composition**

The students in this exam were asked to write an essay on one of the following topics: (1) Describe a Traffic Accident, (2) Write about an Interesting Film You Have Seen or (3) Tell a Story about an Absent-minded Man. The time devoted for this exam was 90 minutes and the total marks were 40.

The sample of 30 students' writing was taken from 200-300 hundred students. The sample was selected to cover a wide range of marks: 8, 13, 20, 27 and 35 out of 40. A wide range of ability, based on teachers' marks, was selected. That is to say, the lowest mark is 8; the highest is 35 and is therefore representative of a reasonable range of students' writing ability.

- **Fourth Year: 30 exam scripts of World Literature**

The students in this exam were asked to answer two questions out of several questions, each one was allotted 50 marks with total 100. The questions answered by the students in the sample of the current study were: (1) Discuss the Moral and Heroic Achievements of Odysseus, (2) closely related to (1), Comment on a Quotation Taken from The Odyssey by Homer, one of their course books, and (3) Discuss the Concept of Love in Moliere's The Misanthrope. Their answers, furthermore, were to be in the form of an essay. Each student wrote two essays but for the purpose of this study only one question from each of the 30 students was photocopied for analysis.

The time for this exam was 3 hours, 90 minutes for each question. The lowest and highest marks are 15 and 38 out of 50 respectively.

### **2.3 Procedure of analysis**

All the data from the essay scripts were typed onto disk. Since the scripts were hand written, they could not be electronically scanned, but the typed version accurately reproduced the texts written by the students with all errors and slips retained. Once they were in computer readable form, the texts were analysed in various ways (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

When analysing the data, it was decided to restrict or limit analysis to only two years instead of four, namely the first and the fourth. The reasons behind such restriction were as follows:



1. The first year is a reasonable place to start with because it is the time when students begin their university learning. The essays represent the lowest level for which data was available.
2. The fourth year is also good to finish with because it is the final year of the Syrian universities' undergraduate course in the Humanities. When students graduate, they are supposed to have reasonably developed their writing skills before pursuing their postgraduate studies or joining the world of work, which may demand good skills of writing. The gap between first year and fourth year is big enough, it seems to me, to demonstrate reasonable degrees of change or development in the students' writing.

## **2.4 Additional scripts**

Essays written by the same students were also collected from the second and third year final examinations. However, it was decided not to use these data in the main analysis for two reasons:

1. The third year examination allowed students three hours writing time in contrast to first and fourth years which allowed only 90 minutes. Therefore a controlled comparison could not be made.
2. The first and fourth year essays provided the clearest range of development and generated a large amount of data. It was impractical to analyse second year essays in equivalent detail owing to lack of space and time. However, these data are available for future research (See Appendix 2).

## **2.5 Students' attitudes to writing**

Two methods of identifying students' attitudes to writing were utilised: a questionnaire and interviews.

### **• Questionnaire**

With respect to the *questionnaire*, of which a sample is in Appendix 3, copies of this questionnaire were administered to 100 undergraduate students who were in their final stage of study in the Department of English. Ninety copies ( 90% which is a high percentage) were returned after they were completed by students, and the other ten

were taken away by the students. Before distributing the questionnaire, the students were told that their information would be confidential and their permission was given to use the answers for the purposes of this study. In addition, instructions and explanations were given to the students by the current researcher, who supervised the process of filling in and returning the questionnaires and answered their enquiries and questions regarding this questionnaire.

The questionnaire was administered in English. The possibility of giving the questionnaire in Arabic was considered, but, since all the students are English majors, it was decided to use English.

- **Interviews**

The *interview*, of which the questions and the transcribed answers are in the appendix 4, was conducted after the questionnaire; the main objectives were to check any point not clear from the questionnaire. The second objective was to follow up in further detail any points found interesting in the questionnaire. A random sample of ten students ( 5 female and 5 male) in their final stage of study in the Department of English was interviewed. Further, the interviews were conducted in the students' native language, namely Arabic. The possibility of conducting these interviews in English was considered, but, it was thought that this would affect the amount of information they would provide. Many of them, in particular the shy students, prefer not to speak in English in front of their tutors (the researcher was a tutor), especially when recorded on tapes. It was, therefore, decided to use Arabic. This has the advantage, I assume, of avoiding any chance of misunderstanding. Before running the interviews, the students' permission was obtained to tape their responses; they were also told that the information would be confidential and it would be used only for the purposes of the current study. Further, it was explained that their current teachers would not read their responses, which had the advantage, I think, of encouraging the students to provide more information and express their attitudes freely without being involved in any kind of embarrassment with their teachers.

Four further points must be added here. First, the significant sections of the students' responses have been transcribed and translated into English. Secondly, the interviews were run informally and in a friendly atmosphere so that the students might feel more relaxed and encouraged to provide more information. Thirdly, all the questions were listed so as to give an equal chance to the interviewees and in the long run to help in the analysis of responses. Finally, all the interviews started with a chat and general questions about such matters as the summer holiday and gradually moved to the specific questions so that the students would not feel constrained about any question and so that they would provide authentic information as far as possible.

Some of the interviews were run in the offices provided by the Dept of English and others were run in the residential halls of the students.

## **2.6 Native speakers' subjective assessment of students' writing**

A small project was designed to be carried out by native speaker teachers. The sample consisted of 5 pairs of essays produced under exam conditions and written by the same students, but at different stages of university learning. These essays were chosen randomly, that is the first five essays in order of 30 students. The subjects who carried this project were 20 native speaker teachers of English, who had at least five years experience of teaching English. The project required these subjects to answer for each pair of essays 3 questions on the attached sheets given to them (For full details of the aims and procedures of this project see Chapter 7).

## **2.7 Limitations of the data and research methods**

The present research mainly focused on the linguistic analysis of students' writing at university level under exam conditions with the purpose of identifying, if any, the progress they made over the period of four years. But this research has its own limitations relating to the data which can be taken into account by further research.

These limitations can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The content of topics on which students were asked to write their essays was beyond the researcher's control because the data goes back to exam scripts of 1989-

1992, even though the data was collected in summer 1994. Nevertheless, what was more significant was the chance of getting pieces of writing produced by the same subjects at different stages of their university learning.

2) Unfortunately, it was impossible for the current researcher to use the same subjects whose exam scripts were analysed for the questionnaire and the interviews. Therefore the researcher was obliged to use different subjects, but ones who were similar to the subjects of this research. That is they were in their final stages of university learning. This issue can be taken into account in future studies as will be discussed in 9.5 (suggestions for further studies) of the present study.

3) Although it was possible to collect a total of 120 exam scripts over four years, it was decided to limit the analysis to only 60 exam scripts for two years, namely 1 and 4. The reasons behind these limits were discussed in section 2.3 above.

Future studies can compare students' writing ability at different levels, that is to say year 1, year 2, year 3, and year 4 of university learning, to pick up the minute changes and development in the students' writing skills.

4) Analysing pieces of writing produced under relaxed conditions, at home for example (where access to dictionaries and reference books is possible), was beyond the scope of the current research because it is mainly concerned with analysing writing produced under exam conditions, where dictionaries or reference books were not allowed. It might, therefore, be interesting for other studies to compare pieces of writing produced under different conditions (at home and in the exam, for instance) as will be noted in 9.5 (suggestions for further research) of the present study.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This short chapter has introduced in outline the methods used in this research. Before explaining the research in detail and reporting on the results, I present (in Chapter 3) a survey of previous relevant research.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter comprises the literature review chapter of the current research. Different ways of measuring writing development are considered in 3.2. This includes quantitative measures and the holistic approach to evaluation. Section 3.3 considers the role of L1 in the writing of L2, whether positively or negatively. Some problems that ESL learners encounter are discussed in 3.4. These include difficulties at both the syntactic and discourse levels. The reading-writing relationship is dealt with in Section 3.5. The role of feedback in improving students' writing is discussed in 3.6. This includes types of feedback, students' reactions to teacher's written comments, peer review and treatment of errors in writing. 3.7 reports some students' attitudes to writing. Finally a brief summary is given in 3.8.

### **3.2 Ways of Measuring Writing Development**

There are various ways of measuring writing development, some of which are based on quantitative measures involving counting of linguistic features in text, and others based on holistic evaluation. In this section, I review some research carried by Hunt (1965, 1977), Wilkinson et al (1980), Carlin (1986), El-Shafie (1990), Connor (1990) and Ferris (1994).

#### **• Hunt**

In this section I review Hunt's studies (1965 and 1977) of writing development. Hunt's research is given special emphasis here because of its relevance to the current research, which, in part, employs Hunt's methods of analysis. Although Hunt did his research in the USA with American school students, his methods are still relevant because they provide a formal system for measuring sentence complexity. What is more, it is interesting to compare his findings for native speaker writers with those for Syrian students in the present study. The purpose of his research was twofold:

1. To provide, for the quantitative study of grammatical (syntactic) structures, a method of procedure which is coherent, systematic, broad, yet capable of refinement to accommodate details.

2. To search for developmental trends in the frequency of various grammatical structures written by students of average IQ in the fourth, eighth and twelfth grades.(p.1)

The reasons for choosing his sample of three grades, 4,8 and 12, Hunt argues, are that the 4th grade is a reasonable point to start with since average children are ready to write; the 12th grade is the final school grade; and the 8th is a check point in the middle between 4 and 12. It is reasonable to expect development of language skills over this period.

The subjects of Hunt's study were nine boys and nine girls at each level, making a total of 54 children, each of whom produced 1000 words of writing. The writing was done in formal conditions, in class. They were students at Florida State University school at Tallahassee of average intelligence.

Hunt was interested in measuring the development of children's writing abilities. Hunt set out to test the hypothesis that young children write shorter sentence units, and older children write longer sentence units. In other words, as children grow older their writing becomes more complex. Hunt, further, considered the frequent use of 'ands', namely co-ordination, a typical feature of younger children's writing.

To measure writing development, Hunt tried to find objective ways of measurement. He decided not to base his measurement of writing on the capital letter and full stop, the formal markers of the sentence because young children do not use punctuation properly and may not even use it at all. For example he found a sample of writing by a fourth grade student, which was punctuated as one sentence of 68 words, four times as long the average twelfth grade sentence (For detail see Hunt 1965:20). Therefore he established a new and more useful tool for measuring language development than pre-existing measures that had been used. This method was later applied by many researchers to measure writing development at different grade levels. To avoid the ambiguity or inconsistency of clause and sentence definitions used in earlier research, Hunt introduced a new base unit that can be systematically

examined. This unit was termed 'T-unit', which means a 'minimal terminable unit' (p.49). Hunt (1977: 92-93) has defined each T-unit 'as a single main clause (or independent clause, if you prefer) plus whatever other subordinate clauses or non-clauses are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause'. The examples given below are taken from students' writing reported by Hunt; he did not give his own examples (1965: 20):

1. They almost caught the white whale.
2. The captain said if you can kill the white whale, Moby Dick, I will give this gold to the one that can do it.

(1) is one T-unit consisting of one main clause and (2) is one T-unit but consisting of four clauses:

- i. The captain said
- ii. if you can kill the white whale, Moby Dick
- iii. I will give this gold to the one
- iv. that can do it.

The T-unit in (1) is 6 words long. The T-unit in (2) is 24 words long.

In order to examine the differences in syntax of students at the three grades mentioned above, Hunt employed the T-unit index to minimise the subjective interpretation and arbitrary classification that had been used by other researchers.

Using the T-unit index, Hunt argues:

'it was possible to (1) to provide an apparently more valid index of maturity; (2) reappraise the significance of clause length and frequency of subordinate clauses as factors contributing to sentence length; and (3) explain why ...sentence length... is not so good an index as T-unit length' (p. 141).

Hunt started his analysis of students' writing with some indices of maturity such as clause length, sentence length and the frequency of subordinate clauses. Because Hunt was not satisfied with these indexes, he used the T-unit index, which has proved, according to him, to be a better and more reliable indicator of young learners'

writing development, when compared with other indexes such as sentence length (when measured on the basis of punctuation) and clause length.

Moreover, Hunt reported that the mean clause per T-unit and mean T-unit length do increase as the children advance from a grade to another. In his study, the average T-unit length for the three grades was as follows: 8.6, 11.5 and 14.4 words per T-unit respectively. This shows a steady and constant increase in the mean length of T-units (almost 3 words per unit) from one level to the next level.

Regarding the structures of T-units of the writing of the three grades, which was the second part of Hunt's study, Hunt found that among the three kinds of subordination (noun clauses, adjective clauses and adverb clauses) the adjective clauses were the most important indication of maturity. They had increased significantly as students advanced from one grade to another grade. In terms of percentages, the increase was 46%, 68% and 100% respectively. The increase between eighth and twelfth is slightly bigger than between fourth and eighth.

In general, the analysis revealed that young children write short t-units with many 'ands' or insufficient full stops, while older children write longer t-units, confirming his hypothesis mentioned earlier. Moreover, the percentage of short T-units decreased at higher levels from 43% at grade 4 to 21% at grade 8 and only 10% at grade 12. As will be seen in Chapter 4, similar results are reported in the current research relative to the increase in the T-unit length and the number of clauses per T-unit.

Hunt also examined 18 articles written by superior adults which appeared in Harper's and Atlantic magazines (equally divided between the two magazines editions from January, February and March 1964). His analysis was also limited to the first 1000 words for each subjects, the same amount of writing produced and analysed by students in the different grades.

The main purpose of this analysis was to compare the writing of superior adults with that of twelfth grade students' writing.



Similar to the findings in the three grades, superior adults have the tendency to write still longer units, giving further support to Hunt's hypothesis. The percentage of writing made in short T-units for superior adults was 6 %. Hunt suggests that 'The decline from group to group is remarkably constant' (p. 60).

Another clear difference between the twelfth grade group and superior adults is the clause length. It is 8.6 words per clause for the grade 12 and 11.5 words per clause for superior adults. This shows that superior adults use 36% more words in their clauses, which increases their average length of T-units (14.4 words for 12 grade and 20.3 words for superior adults).

Superior adults gave support to the finding that mature writers have a higher frequency of relative clauses. The possibility that a superior adult will use an adjective clause in a T-unit is 1 in 4, while the chance that a twelfth grader will do so is 1 in 5.

Hunt's study concluded with two claims: (1) as the learners grow older, they have the tendency to write longer T-units (Hunt calls it the 'T-unit hypothesis') and (2) as the learners grow older, they have the tendency to 'consolidate' in the sense that they expand their T-units by adding more nonstructural clauses (Hunt calls it the 'number of consolidations hypothesis'). Both these hypotheses are relevant to the present research.

Unlike Hunt's earlier research which analysed 'free writing', Hunt's 1977 research used a 'rewriting' method for investigation. Rewriting, according to Hunt, means rewriting a passage, which is written in very short sentences, in a better way. Hunt mentions several merits of this technique. For example, it is practical in the sense one can examine the student's command of grammatical complexity in less than an hour. In this research Hunt was interested in examining the changes made by children at different grades producing the same piece of writing, 'Aluminium' and 'Chicken' passages. Here are the first six sentences for the former passage (for full detail of these passages see Hunt 1977: 103).

1. Aluminium is a metal.
2. It is abundant.
3. It has many uses.
4. It comes from bauxite.
5. bauxite is an ore.
6. Bauxite looks like clay.

300 subjects participated in this study: 250 students chosen from grades 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 (50 from each grade), plus 25 adult firemen who had finished their high school, called here adults, and 25 skilled adults (professional writers) who published articles in Harpers or Atlantic magazines. All subjects were asked to rewrite the Aluminium passage, and their texts were analysed, focusing on the re-write of the six sentences mentioned above.

Hunt did this research to further test his two hypotheses mentioned above.

The analysis has shown evident support and confirmation of both claims. In terms of T-unit length, the increase of T-unit length for G4, G6, G8, G10, G12, average adults and skilled adults as follows: 5.4, 6.8, 9.8, 10.4, 11.3, 11.9 and 14.8 words respectively. In terms of the number of consolidations, there was a clear increase for all students (the order as above) was as follows: 1.1, 1.6, 2.4, 2.8, 3.2 and 5.1 times respectively. To put it differently, the fourth grades, for instance, consolidated the six sentences of the Aluminium passage in five T-units, the eighth grades in about three T-units, the skilled adults in almost one T-unit. Typical examples of their consolidations of the six sentences of the passage mentioned above are given below:

**A Fourth grader:**

Aluminium is a metal and it is abundant. It has many uses and it comes from bauxite. Bauxite is an ore and looks like clay. (3 T-units)

This writer co-ordinated two pairs of T-units and one pair of predicates.

### **An eighth Grader:**

Aluminium is an abundant metal, has many uses, and comes from bauxite.

Bauxite is an ore that looks like clay. (2 T-units)

This writer used the adjective 'abundant' as a modifier instead of predicate, co-ordinated three predicates and changed the last input into a relative adjective clause.

### **A Skilled Adult:**

Aluminium, an abundant metal with many uses comes from bauxite, a clay-like ore. (1 T-unit)

In addition to using a pronominal adjective, he reduced sentence 1 to an appositive. He replaced 'have' with the preposition 'with', changing the predicate in sentence 6 into modifier. He reduced sentence 5 to another appositive.

Hunt suggests that some syntactic structures bloom early such as co-ordination, and some late such as appositives or relatives. We shall see that this is also a feature of Syrian students' writing. Moreover, Hunt mentions that syntactic maturity can be increased by sentence-combining practice.

### **• Wilkinson and Others**

Wilkinson et al (1980) take a different approach to assessing writing development. Instead of using count measures, Wilkinson et al analysed writing development using four models: cognitive, affective, moral and stylistic.

In the cognitive model, four categories are mentioned which they believed reflect movement from concrete to abstract. These categories are: describing, interpreting, generalising and speculating.

In the affective model, development is viewed in terms of self (one's own emotions and feelings), others (other people, reader and environment) and reality (the world of phenomenon and the world of imagination).

In the moral model, development is seen in terms of judgement about self, others and events in relation to reward and punishment, conventional rules, and abstract concepts.

In the stylistic model, development is seen in terms of syntax, verbal competence, organisation, cohesion, writer's awareness of the reader, appropriateness, and effectiveness (for full detail of the four models see Wilkinson et al 1980: 65-91).

The above models were the basis of analysis in the Credition Project. Three groups of children ( a total of 100) with ages seven, ten and thirteen were asked to write four writing tasks in order to make a comparison between the work of children at different ages. These tasks were: autobiography, explanation, narration and argument. The writing tasks were analysed in terms of the four models mentioned above.

Wilkinson concluded that certain characteristics could be identified at each stage of development. These are summarized below from Wilkinson et al 1980: 92-214):

#### **A) Seven year olds:**

One characteristic of the writing of children at seven is the small amount of information presented. This writing is 'context-free'. This might be due to two reasons, the authors suggest: the focus on mechanics of writing and lack of awareness of what the reader may expect. Another feature of writing of children at this age relative to the style model is a 'spoken style' such as basic active sentences joined by conjunctions mostly by 'and', 'then' and 'so' (supporting Hunt 1965). Further, the range of vocabulary is limited.

#### **B) Ten year olds:**

In terms of style, for example, one can notice that the range of vocabulary of ten year children is larger than that of seven year children. Further, there is an initial awareness of register. Moreover, they are aware of the reader who expects something from them in writing, irrespective of their success or failure to meet these needs.

### **C) Thirteen year olds:**

Concerning the style model, the harmony between syntax and meaning is evident in the writing of thirteen year olds, with variations among the students of this group. For instance, the use of linking devices is a clear sign of development.

An important factor in the research of Hunt and Wilkinson is that the pieces of writing analysed were written by different groups of children. They were not able to collect writing done by the same children at later stages of development.

#### **• Carlin**

Carlin (1986), however, attempted to study the writing development of individual children. He collected samples of writing on five topics from children between the ages of seven and twelve. The children were in three schools in Western Australia, referred to as A, B and C for reference. He finally collected work from 48 children, with 24 in school A (14 boys, 10 girls), 12 in school B (6 boys, 6 girls) and 12 in school C (7 boys, 5 girls). After the completion of the data collection in 1984, the children were given a Language Ability Test and 18 of them were interviewed.

Carlin (1986) argues that while some children exhibited early development, the significant development took place between the eleventh and twelfth years. He supports his argument by presenting four pieces of writing produced by the same three children (2 pieces for each) at different ages (11 and 12) on the same topic. The information in the second piece of writing produced by the age of twelve, Carlin mentions, was sequenced more logically and in a coherent way. The new sense of the reader is a big sign of improvement in the second piece of writing.

To measure writing development objectively, Carlin adopted a method of total word count and average clause length, with the addition of the personal pronoun index as a measure of 'decentration and elaboration'. He also used the system devised by Wilkinson et al (1980) (mentioned earlier) which is holistic in nature and uses cognitive, moral and stylistic models of development.

Regarding the objective measures, which Carlin termed 'count measures', the results supported earlier research findings: there is a consistent increase in sentence and clause length, in the amount of embedding in sentences, and in the diversity of kinds of embedding used, on the one hand; and a steady decrease in the number of personal pronouns used per 100 words of the text. No explanation is, unfortunately, provided about the personal pronouns in this report.

Carlin (1986: 190) claims that 'By using Wilkinson model (1980: 227-38) for the analysis of writing[,] the differences in individual development become clearer-differences that are not obvious on the basis of count measures alone'. To support his argument he analysed two texts written by two children on the same topic: 'Teachers College'. For instance, Andrew's and Michael's writing, two children who share the same age, school and socio-economic background, were analysed according to Wilkinson's model. Andrew shows a limited affective development. His vocabulary is also limited and description vague. Further he does not exhibit an awareness of the reader and his writing shows a little aspect of organization.

Michael, by contrast, shows a clear sense of the reader. His vocabulary is wide enough to give exact descriptions. Further, he controls his feelings, his approach is more balanced and uses a variety of cohesive devices. Carlin concludes that the count measures are useful for measuring group writing development, the Wilkinson's model is more useful for assessing individual writing development.

From the interviews, Carlin claimed that the children of this study viewed writing as both a skill and a vehicle for expressing experience. Many of them associate writing with 'story': Their favourite activity of writing is story-writing because they find it easier to write.

Regarding the importance of writing, the children reported reasons for writing classified by Carlin as: functional, pragmatic, therapeutic, monomaniac and punitive. In terms of subject matter, the children generally prefer to choose their topics. What concerns the less-developed writer is words, sentences, punctuation and paragraphs;

whereas the more developed writers have no problems with these mechanics of writing. Finally, all children pointed out the vital role of feedback in improving writing.

This study shows a great deal of relevance to the current study because, it involves much analysis of the product in terms of count measures such as word count and average clause length.

- **El-Shafie**

Another relevant study is El-Shafie's (1990) which examined the English writing development of Arab 12 graders. The subjects were six students (aged 18-20) at one UAE Secondary school during the 1989-1990 academic year. All the subjects were female because the college is only for women. They had been learning English for nine years, having six English language periods a week with each period being about 45 minutes, which means they were at approximately the same level as the Syrian subjects in the present study. One class, 45 minutes, a week is devoted to composition. They use the textbook Crescent English which is an EFL English course designed for students in UAE schools with communicative orientations. The sample was selected from a class of 30 students according to 2 criteria. First, the students should be able to respond sufficiently to a topic given to them. Secondly, the students should be able to provide sufficient information and be able to talk about their writing processes and experience. They wrote ten topics in different modes over the span of a year. The students were interviewed by the instructor twice: at the beginning of the year and at the end. Further, the researcher interviewed the students' instructor at the end of the year to elicit information about her observation relative to the students' writing processes and writing behaviour and about her own teaching experience, particularly of writing.

To assess the students' writing development, the researcher did two things: (1) he divided the school year into two stages: first and second semester with five composition at each stage and (2) he chose six compositions out of ten for each student written in three modes (two compositions for each): description, narrative

and expository. One of El-Shafie's main concerns was the way students revised their own writing drafts. This is not of direct relevance to the current research which uses data from largely unrevised examination answers, but it is briefly reported here because of what it reveals about students' attitudes. El-Shafie also has something to say about his subjects' general development in writing.

The data collected was analysed for syntactic revisions according to Bridwell's revision taxonomy (1980), and for semantic revision, according to Faigley & Witte's revision taxonomy (1981). Bridwell's taxonomy is mainly concerned with any addition, deletion or substitution made by the writer on different levels such as lexical, phrase, clause, sentence and multi-sentence level. Faigley and Witte's taxonomy, on the other hand, is concerned with meaning changes the writer makes on two levels: microstructure (surface changes) and macrostructure (global changes). The selected compositions were assessed holistically by two experienced raters using a scale of six points 6-1 (6: high, 1: low)

Results revealed that there was growth in number of words from first to final draft for each topic. In other words, all six students wrote, on average, more words in their last draft than in their first draft. Both the amount and type of revision used by all students were similar. They substituted, added and deleted at the word level far more often than they expanded, reduced and moved chunks of texts. Syntactic revision, he adds, was more frequent at the word and phrase level than at the clause, sentence and multi-sentence level. All students revised extensively to get the right word to convey meaning. Most students paid attention to formal and meaning preserving revision more than other types of semantic changes. Further, each student made recognisable and consistent progress in the quality of writing over the span of a year; the writing quality of the essays improved from topic to topic and from first to final draft.

All students believed that the amount of time had a great effect on the quality of their writing. They did well, they argued, because they were given enough time to revise as much as they could. They submitted their essays when they felt that they could not



revise any more. Further, they reported that when they wrote in class, they revised at the surface or word level, but when they wrote at home, they revised more at the sentence and text level. The home essays were to a larger extent free from spelling mistakes and had fewer grammatical mistakes because the students could use dictionaries or references or consult somebody about any problem they faced. This is of interest to the current research because Syrian subjects display a different attitude, which needs some explanation (see Chapter 8). Kroll (1990), however, in her descriptive analysis of 100 essays written by 25 advanced ESL students at the freshman composition level in the University of Southern California, found that additional time did not necessarily lead to sufficiently improved essays. The differences, she adds, between the essays produced under exam conditions and those at home were not statistically significant, though the measures used to assess syntactic accuracy and rhetorical competence revealed a marginal level of improvement for home essays.

El-Shafie's study suffers from a major flaw; it did not do what it set out to do. El-Shafie (1990: 18) states that, 'In this study, I will count the number of T-units produced per student composition, i. e. [sic], frequency of T-units per composition, and also the number of words produced per T-unit, i. e., the average length of the T-unit. But unfortunately he reports on neither.

Despite this weakness this case study shows some relevance to the current research in so far as it measures the increase of words for the essays written by each student at different stages (first semester and second semester), an aspect of the present study.

### **Connor**

Connor (1990) was interested in comparing measurable characteristics with holistic evaluation in order to develop valid measures of assessing *persuasive* student writing. The data consisted of 150 essays (50 for each country) produced by high school students from three countries: England, New Zealand and the United States. The independent variables involved three measures: features of syntax, coherence and persuasion. Connor does not provide in her publication, the full details of her methods

of analysis. Although she lists her variables, it is often unclear as to how these can be measured objectively. For example, even experienced readers find it difficult to agree on the measurement of 'topic development', one of the coherence features mentioned, and the recognition of 'claims' or 'persuasive appeals', two of 'persuasive' features listed. The dependent variable involved holistic evaluation of these essays by three experienced and independent raters. Then a comparison was made between the two analyses.

The results indicated that three independent variables and word count had significant correlations and were good predictors of writing quality which explained 61% of the holistic scoring. The three independent variables noted by Connor were: 'persuasiveness' (the factor previously noted by Toulmin 1958), credibility appeal and the syntactic factor. The so-called independent measures of credibility and persuasiveness are not 'objective' in the sense in which the term is used in the present study since they require subjective recognition.

The study concluded with implications for teaching and assessing argumentative/persuasive writing. For example, not only mechanics and style should be stressed but the persuasive structure and the use of persuasive appeal as well.

### **Ferris**

Recently, Ferris (1994) analysed the data of 160 ESL learner essays which come from four L1 groups: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish; this data consisted of 40 texts for each language group. These essays were produced in 35 minutes as part of a university placement examination regarding the effects of 'culture shock'. The essays were divided into 2 groups according to the placement examinations results: group 1 (60 essays) assigned a lower level, and group 2 (100 essays) assigned an advanced level. Following a 'multidimensional approach' to assessing writing, Ferris identified 62 syntactic and lexical text features. But for statistical considerations, Ferris argues, some of these variables were either combined or dropped leaving an overall of 28 text variables to be compared with holistic ratings given these essays. These features were given in the following form (with no further details):

- |                              |                                |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Number of words           | 2. Words per sentence          |
| 3. Word length               | 4. Present tense verbs         |
| 5. Past tense/perfect aspect | 6. 1st/2nd person pronoun      |
| 7. 3rd person pronoun        | 8. Impersonal pronoun          |
| 9. Adverbials                | 10. Special lexical classes    |
| 11. Relative clauses         | 12. Modals                     |
| 13. Negation                 | 14. Stative forms              |
| 15. Co-ordination            | 16. Passives                   |
| 17. Complementation          | 18. Prepositional phrases      |
| 19. Participials             | 20. Nominal forms              |
| 21. Coherence Features       | 22. Definite article reference |
| 23. Deictic reference        | 24. Repetition                 |
| 25. Comparatives             | 26. Lexical inclusion          |
| 27. Synonymy                 | 28. Reduced structures         |

The analysis was carried to find out how far these 28 text variables made a distinction between the two groups of students. Further, coefficient correlations were considered to see how far these text variables predicted the holistic ratings given to the essays. The results indicated that 18 of these variables demonstrated significant differences between the two groups of learners. Such variables were *Number of words*, *Passives* and *Impersonal pronoun* (for a complete list of these text variables see Ferris 1994:417). Further, four of these features were considerably related to the holistic ratings given to the essays by three independent teachers. These variables were *passives*, *nominalizations*, *conjuncts* and *prepositions*.

Ferris's main concern was not writing development; rather he was interested in comparing some text variables used by learners at two different levels with the holistic scores given to the essays written by the above learners. This is not of direct relevance to the present research which is mainly concerned with the development of students' writing ability, but it is reported here because of what it reveals about some text variables which are used more frequently by advanced learners. The variables used in the present study were chosen with this work in mind.

In concluding this section, I might say that very little attention has been paid to the development of adults' writing ability when compared with that of children's. And this is a major justification for carrying out this current research. Moreover, I might say that Hunt's research is closely relevant to this thesis because much of the present research involves T-units analysis of students' writing at different stages of their learning (See Chapter 4).

### 3.3 The role of mother tongue in L2 writing

In this section an investigation of some of the research relative to the impact of L1 on L2 writing, positively or negatively, is considered in detail. In the past the first language has been considered the villain in second language learning, as put by Dulay and Burt (1974); it is one of the major causes of difficulty that learners encounter when they acquire/ learn a new language. Teachers of ESL, therefore, were not usually in favour of encouraging students to use L1 in the ESL context. It was further considered better if students could be trained, through English, to think and write in English. The reason behind such a negative attitude towards L1 might be due to the claim that L1 hinders and constrains second language acquisition (SLA) because L1 structure and vocabulary would be transferred to L2; this would be even clearer when the two languages examined were not related to each other. Araboff (1967), for instance, pointed that learners of a second language should avoid topics related to their mother tongue because they might translate from L1 into English. But in recent years, the attitude towards L1 changed: it is no longer viewed as playing a negative role in learning a second language; rather it is seen as increasing the learner's linguistic repertoire.

The contrastive analysis (CA) hypothesis claims that when the structures of L1 and L2 are identical/ similar, 'positive transfer' and correct usage of languages are expected to transfer. For instance, the plurals in Spanish and English both involve the addition of *-s* or *-es* to nouns (*tavernas, universidades, books, boxes* respectively, for example). Likewise, 'negative transfer' and incorrect usage of language are expected to take place when the structures of the two languages are different. For example, in Arabic, unlike English, the adjective is always placed after the noun; therefore, according to CA hypothesis, Arabic speaking learners are expected to say/ write *the house small*, instead of *the small house*.

An examination of the empirical findings of the research carried out relative to the CA hypothesis has shown that:

1. The majority of the grammatical mistakes found in child or adult L2 performance do not reflect the learner's L1; only a small portion of these errors can be traced to L1 influence or interference: around 4% to 12% for children, and from 8% to 23% for adults (Dulay and Burt 1974). However, the students in the present study are Syrian Adults and 23% could be highly significant as a negative influence.
2. L1 influence might be best exhibited in the phonological mistakes, rather than the grammatical.

Here it is not the intention to attempt to decide whether the CA hypothesis is reliable or not in predicting the problems ESL learners encounter when learning a second language; rather the discussion is limited to some studies carried out with respect to the impact of using L1 in L2 writing. The majority of empirical research in this respect reveals that the use of L1 is positive, with few studies noting negative results.

Below is a survey of some studies in relation to the effects of L1 in L2 writing:

- In her study of two Spanish-speaking subjects, to examine the composing processes and coherence, Chelala (1981) pointed out effective and ineffective practices of her subjects, considering the use of L1 for prewriting and switching back and forth between L1 and L2 to be an ineffective strategy.
- On the other hand Edelsky (1982), in his study of young subjects (first, second and third graders), suggested that the writing skill is transferable across languages, supporting the idea that some factors in the use of L1 can be employed by students to enhance their writing in L2.
- Lay (1982), in her study of four adult, Chinese-speaking L2 students, analysed the compositions written by her subjects, and she interviewed them to get information about their writing background and their attitudes toward writing. Lay outlined that the more use of L1, the better the quality of written texts, in particular in terms of ideas and organization, suggesting three things: (1) using L1 is useful at

certain stages in language development, (2) certain topics, namely those culturally related to L1, seem to elicit more use of L1 than other topics and (3) using L1 helps planning on unfamiliar topics. Lay's first finding seems to contradict Chelala's (1981). Whereas Lay's (1982) second finding is supported by that of Burtoff (1983) and Friedlander (1990).

- Burtoff (1983), for instance, in his analysis of the 90 compositions written by freshmen of Arabic and Japanese- speaking subjects, found that the nature of topics, such as those culturally related, affects the discourse structure, resulting in more use of L1.
- Other evidence comes from a study by Friedlander (1990), which is given special emphasis. When compared with all other studies which have only between 2 and 6 subjects, Friedlander's seems to be more reliable in its findings because it has a reasonable number (28 subjects). Friedlander convincingly argues that depending on the students' level, the use of L1 should be determined by the learners' level in L2. Beginners are advised to avoid using L1 as much as possible, otherwise it might hinder or at least delay acquiring English. The advanced students, on the other hand, can use L1 frequently because it will not affect the acquisition of English, as put by Friedlander:

whereas beginning learners of English need to operate in their second language as much as possible to develop their acquisition of English, more advanced users of English have developed their proficiency to such a level that their native language does not interfere with their writing in English; such writers should be able to improve aspects of their writing if they use their first language to retrieve and write down topic-area information and then translate their first language notes into English (ibid. 111-112).

It is important for teachers, I suggest, to know the best times or conditions for using L1 in preparing the topic.

Thus Friedlander (1990) proposes that when the Chinese students, for instance, write about something they have experienced which is culturally related to them, they will be able to plan in the language related to the topic. By planning, Friedlander means the process of coming up with and organizing ideas to be included in the final essay.

To support his hypothesis, Friedlander used 28 Chinese speaking students who were studying at an American university, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The students were told to respond to two letters; for one letter they were asked to plan in the L1 and for the other letter in L2. The 'matching condition' was for those who planned in the language related to the topic (the students planned a letter in Chinese on Qingming, a Chinese festival, in English on a topic related to the difficulties they found in America); the 'mismatching condition' was those who planned in the language not related to topic (in English on the Chinese related topic, in Chinese on the English related topic). After they had completed planning in either case, final texts were written in English.

The data were analysed taking into account the following criteria: the time they needed to complete the task, the time spent on the plan, the draft, the revision; the details in each plan; the length of the plan and the essay (in number of words) and the ratings of the plan and essay based on holistic scoring of six points: one being weak and six being strong.

The results, generally speaking, demonstrated clear evidence on the behalf of the matching group: they produced more details when they planned in Chinese on a Chinese topic, but in English on an English topic; the other group, in contrast, did not produce a detailed content in the mismatching condition. The former group, further, produced richer information, which was better in quality (4.67 in contrast to 3.61 on the scale respectively). In terms of essay length in the matching condition, the essays were over 100 words longer than those in the mismatching condition (484.96 in contrast to 365.77 words respectively).



Regarding the topic, Friedlander (1990: 117) points out that ‘writing about the topic related to their first language resulted in superior texts’.

With respect to translation, the study reveals that it seemed to foster writers rather than constrain them when the topic-area knowledge is in their native language. Moreover, the students appeared to benefit, as the findings suggest, from planning in the language related to topic, echoing Lay’s finding (1982): the use of L1 for some topics enhanced or brought about an improvement in the essay quality. Thus Friedlander (1990: 124) concludes his study by suggesting ‘that planning and preliminary considerations of a topic can be enhanced if ESL writers understand that the language of topic-area knowledge can have a positive effect on their planning and writing [in the long run].

By analogy, I find myself in a position to suggest, when writing in English, the Arabic students, the Syrian in this context, might write better if they produce first a plan in Arabic and then wrote the essay in English, provided they are advanced learners.

In concluding this section, I might say that the majority of studies relative to the use of L1 in L2 writing reveal positive results particularly in the later stages of learning. This section of the literature review is relevant to the current study because the researcher like all teachers at university level should be aware of the effects of L1 on L2 writing.

### **3.4 Problems that Arab learners face when writing in English**

The classical written language of Arabic is the language of the Quran, the holy book believed to be the divine words of God, and the traditions of Mohammed, sayings of the prophet. Thus special devotion and respect are given to these sources by all Muslims in general and Arabs in particular who believe that the Quran is unique in its style and content. Further, any attempt to criticise the holy book is doomed to failure and is considered blasphemous. Consequently, all principles of grammar and rhetoric in Arabic have been drawn from the Quran itself. All followers of Islam learn verses from the Quran by heart. When Arabs speak or write, traces of Quranic influence are to large extent clear in their language. Moreover, since the Quran has remained unchanged, this has kept the Arabic language relatively stable when compared with other languages (English for example), which have undergone many changes. Islam encourages education, and learning is compulsory for every one. Those who read the Quran are highly respected and referred to as ‘learned’ and ‘intellectual’ language users, speakers or writers.

In this section, I review the work on some problems that Arab students might encounter at university level when writing in English that may result from the contrasts between Arabic and English.

#### **3.4.1 Contrastive rhetoric and syntax**

Many studies have pointed out differences between languages and cultural differences in discourse. Kaplan (1966), for example, laid the foundation for contrastive rhetoric. He claimed out that non-native students’ writing problems are not just due to differences between the grammatical structures of the target language, English, and those of the students’ mother tongue, but also to educational and rhetorical differences and distinctive cultures. Thus according to Kaplan, rhetoric and ‘logic’ vary from one culture to another and from time to time within a given culture.

Kaplan (1972) analysed nearly 600 essays written by mature students whose native languages were not English. His subjects belonged to three basic language groups: Arabic, Chinese and Spanish (for full details of the subdivisions of languages

examined see Kaplan 1972 footnotes 3: 38). Kaplan pointed out that paragraph development in Arabic, unlike the English paragraph, which he described as 'linear', depended to a large extent upon a complex series of parallel constructions. He mentions four types of parallelism explained by examples taken from King James version of the Old Testament ( examples in italics are taken from Kaplan 1972: 39-40):

(1) Synonymous Parallelism: *His descendants will be mighty in the land and the generation of the upright will be pleased.*,

(2) Synthetic Parallelism: *Because he inclined his ear to me therefore I will call on him as long as I live.*,

(3) Antithetical Parallelism: *For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: But the way of the wicked shall perish.*

(4) Climatic Parallelism: *Give unto the Lord, O ye sons of the mighty, Give unto the Lord glory and strength.* (for full explanation see *ibid.*: 39).

Such structures, Kaplan suggests, seem to be 'archaic or awkward' to the modern English reader. Further, Kaplan gives examples from a paper written by an Arab student learning English as a second language at an American university, which had extensive parallel constructions. Eight conjunctions (such as 'and' and 'but') and four sentence connectors (such as 'however' and 'nevertheless') were used in a total of just 14 sentences.

Kaplan's finding was given support by Burtoff (1983) who examined written compositions produced by students belonging to three different cultures (American, Japanese and Arabs). The data consisted of essays in English on two topics produced by the subjects of this study who were students in high-intermediate to advanced ESL classes or in university composition classes. The results as reported by El-Shafie (1990) revealed that Arabic learners preferred to explain things by providing

examples and organizing things of equal weight in parallel constructions in short texts.

Atari (1983:181) addressed the problems that Arab learners face when writing in English at tertiary level. The data consisted of 30 letters of complaint and 30 letters making promises produced by 2 groups of students: Arab learners majoring in English from Bethlehem University on the West Bank of Jordan and American learners in the graduate linguistics program at American University in Washington. He found that Arab university students seem to have the tendency to follow certain techniques in their written English such as including a broad statement in the opening sections of their essays before introducing the topic sentence. Atari concludes that the techniques of writing in English employed by Arab students are not in harmony with the American reader's expectations which might result in 'socio-pragmatic failure', as termed by Bloor and Bloor (1991).

Turning to syntactic features, in her paper 'Arabic interference in the written English of Sudanese students-one of the areas where errors are expected-relativisation', Tadros (1978) mentioned three main differences between English and Arabic as far as relative clauses are concerned. They are: (1) the use of direct translation of the Arabic pattern which uses a relative pronoun plus a personal pronoun (instead of the relative pronoun only), (2) omission of the relative pronoun and (3) use of the definite article for the relative pronoun. She limited her discussion to the first category only due to lack of space. In Arabic, as in English, relativisation involves the use of a relative 'particle' (equivalent to the relative pronoun) and the loss of the noun phrase which has a noun identical to the antecedent, to which it refers. But unlike English, in Arabic the relative pronoun does not take the role of subject or object, but acts like an adjective and agrees with the antecedent in number, gender and case. The literal translation of Arabic sentences corresponding to the English ones are given below:

English: The student who borrowed my book came late.

Arabic: The student who *he* borrowed my book came late.

English: The book the boy borrowed is useful.

Arabic: The book the boy borrowed *it* is useful.

English: The knife he cut with is sharp.

Arabic: The knife he cut with *it* is sharp.

It is clear in the Arabic sentences that the personal pronoun (in italics) which refers to the antecedent is retained, unlike English where it is dropped (or ‘conflated’ with the relative marker). Thus Tadros suggested that the errors made by Arab learners regarding relative clauses can be accounted for by L1 interference.

She concludes that after giving students the opportunity to practice making relative clauses in English, sentence combining is a useful exercise. For instance, if they are asked to write paragraph(s) using relative clauses, this might help them overcome some difficulties they face in relative clauses when they write in English.

Thompson-Panos and Thomes Ruzic (1983) also present some facts relative to the Arabic language learners. The two languages, English and Arabic, differ in many aspects; these aspects are possible sources of ‘error production’ and weaknesses in language skills, in particular writing. Arabic, for example, is written from right to left and it does not use the Roman alphabet. Spelling in English, also, is confusing to Arab students. This is partially due to the many exceptions in the spelling system of English and to the complexity of spelling rules, and partially to the lack of correspondence between the spelling system in both languages.

Moreover, they mention that there are four areas in English syntax that cause major problems to Arab learners: verbs, prepositions, articles and relative clauses. Their analysis of the relative clause problem is similar to that of Tadros, discussed above. They also claim that in terms of paragraph and composition, the two languages differ. They state that students’ compositions in English produced by Arab learners can be characterised as ‘awkward’, ‘lacking in organization’ and ‘out of focus’. This, they say, might be due to the fact that English and Arabic use different rhetorical devices. In Arabic, for instance, paragraph development is viewed as a ‘series of parallel constructions’, the same idea as that mentioned by Kaplan, where parts of discourse

are joined by co-ordinating conjunctions. Thus the frequent use of co-ordination and infrequent use of subordination, unlike English, are seen as one of the main characteristics of Arabic speakers' written English. Further, structures such as participial phrases and adverbial clauses, which are needed in academic writing in English, are lacking in Arabic.

Similarly, Smith (1984) pointed out that Arabic learners encounter more difficulties in learning English than speakers of European languages. This is due to the fact, he suggests, that the Arabic writing system, which is simple and phonetic, is totally different from that of Indo-European languages. Arabic learners tend to pronounce English words phonetically such as 'istobbid' (sic) for 'stopped'. Further, no distinction is made between upper and lower cases.

Smith believes that all aspects of writing in English cause major difficulties for Arab learners. Typical problems discussed by Smith include the following:

(1) Misreading letters within words by making right to left 'eye movements'. Words such as 'form' and 'from' may be confused and such errors occur in the writing of the Arab learners, as well, so that 'twon' may be written for 'town'.

(2) In Arabic, unlike English, it is not a problem to begin every sentence with 'and' or 'so'. Co-ordination of this type is, therefore, very frequent in Arabic, written or spoken.

(3) Word order is one of the major differences between the two languages. The Arabic sentence, in principle, begins with the verb followed by subject and other parts of the sentence. This convention is practised more in writing than in speech.

(4) Verb to 'be' in the present is not used in Arabic. It is, then, frequently dropped in English by Arabic writers.

(5) In Arabic, unlike English, adjectives are placed after the noun they qualify; it is not surprising, therefore, to see such expressions as 'the sky blue' instead of 'the blue sky' in the writing of Arab learners.

(6) Adverbs are less commonly used in Arabic than in English; when adjuncts are used they come in prepositional phrases instead of single adverbs, 'in a quick way' for 'quickly', for instance.

(7) Problems with relative clauses are again mentioned. In addition to the contrastive different structures mentioned by Tadros, Smith points out that since, in Arabic, no distinction, except for gender, is carried by the relative pronouns regarding human or non-human, Arabic learners might use 'who' and 'which' interchangeably.

Williams (1984: 118) mentioned that 'One of the most intractable problems facing the EFL or ESP teachers working in the Arab world - and no doubt elsewhere as well- is how to get his pupils to write English that sounds like English. The grammar can be grasped and even some of the idiom but still students' written compositions sound stilted and somewhat illogical. On the other hand, an Englishman with a good grasp of Arabic grammar and some knowledge of Arabic idiom can still write Arabic that verges on and sometimes even lapses into incoherence. Why?'

This might be due to the different patterns of cohesion adopted in the two languages, William suggests. For instance, the cohesive devices used between sentences in English are not adequate for Arabic, where punctuation has only been recently developed. William mentions that at the time of writing his paper 'A Problem of Cohesion' he had a text of approximately six pages written by Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (1810?-89) originally containing no punctuation at all. Even today, Williams adds, full-stops and commas are very rarely used in Arabic prose, so a definition of the sentence based on punctuation is not valid for Arabic. This can be compared with Hunt's reasons for developing T-units rather than punctuated 'sentences' as a measure of maturity (see 3.2). Further, he gives a literal translation of a text of 214

words having only one full stop, taken from Al-Ahram, the Egyptian newspaper, about the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

Williams (1984: 126-127) 'tentatively' concludes with some areas of differences between English and Arabic which need special attention relative to cohesion. They are as follows:

- (i) the usage of subordinating and co-ordinating conjunctions, and discourse adjuncts.
- (ii) defining the nature of the English sentence.
- (iii) the use of non-finite verbal clauses in English. The Arab student will often tend to avoid this type of clause, because it has no parallel in Arabic
- (iv) English does not favour repetition of lexical strings, either for aesthetic or cohesive reasons.
- (v) English does not favour exact co-reference of theme in sentence after sentence.

Kamel (1989: iii) investigated argumentative essays in both Arabic and English written by EFL/ESL students. The students were asked to do a three part task: To write an argumentative essay in English, to write an argumentative essay in Arabic and to take the Michigan Placement Test Form (A). Both essays of Arabic and English were analysed by skilful native speaker raters, employing, among other measures, Hunt's (1965) T-unit analysis. She found that her subjects produced considerably more T-units, more audience adaptation units and more claims in their native language than in English. Further, the study revealed that the ESL group performed better than EFL group when writing in English. The implications of this study are that the problems of writing in English are due to an inadequate command of the grammar and rhetoric of the target language rather than a general inability or conceptual inadequacy.



### 3.4.2 Spelling Mistakes

A specific problem which is frequently mentioned concerns spelling in English. The review here is limited to some relevant work regarding spelling mistakes in English made by university Arab learners of English. Three studies regarding spelling mistakes are reported, that is Ibrahim (1977), Haggan (1991) and Ryan (1993).

Ibrahim (1977) surveyed the spelling mistakes made by a group of Arab students of English. He attempted to account for the spelling mistakes in English which occurred in the writing of undergraduate students at the Department of English in the University of Jordan. He outlined the following categories according to his suggested causes of error. As will be seen, there are problems with type of classification because of possible overlap of categories. It is not possible to decide objectively whether a student writes 'biginner' for 'beginner' because of the 'irregularities' of the English spelling system (category (1)) or because of analogy with 'big' (category 3a). Similarly, almost any error might be assigned to category (5).

(1) Errors caused by the non-phonetic nature of English spelling: He claims that there are a relatively high number of irregularities in the English spelling system. The weak vowels, for instance, can be represented by any vowels in writing: 'biginner' and 'viiligers'. Homophony also accounts for errors such as 'reed' for read, 'brake' for break and 'there' for their (and vice versa).

(2) Errors caused by differences between the sound system of English and students' native language, Arabic in this case: English, unlike Arabic, has two disinctive bilabial plosive [p] and [b]; Arabic has only the latter. It is not surprising, thus, to find Arab learners to confuse and substitute [b] for [p]. This accounts for mistakes such as 'blay' and 'bicture' for play and picture respectively.

(3) Errors which may be attributed to analogy (In (3) Ibrahim distinguishes between three types of analogy):

a) phonetic: the same sound can be represented differently. The sound [ʃ] in 'fought' and 'caught'. This can lead students to write 'tought' instead of taught on the basis of analogy.

b) Orthographic: Two words appear to be similar in spelling such as 'money' and 'many'. It is quite possible to find 'together' replacing 'to gather'.

c) Grammatical: Words such as 'played' and 'liked' can account for the possible mistake in 'toled' and 'heared' for told and heard respectively. This is also attributable to category (1).

(4) Errors which may be attributed to the relative 'inconsistent and arbitrary' nature of English word derivations: Words such as 'brave' and 'slave' retain the [v] when another derivation is made such as 'bravery' and 'slavery'. But the [v] in save is changed into [f] when the noun is formed in 'safety'. An error such as 'savety' can be accounted for either by inconsistency of the English spelling system or for by analogy with the previous words mentioned before.

(5) Errors which may be described as 'transitional' which are due to either (a) ignorance of some English spelling rules or (b) to overgeneralisation of spelling rules: For instance, the rule which says that when adding a suffix to a word in which the primary stress falls on the last syllable, the last consonant of such a word should be doubled, provided that the suffix does not cause a stress shift to another syllable. For example, 'prefer': 'preferred' but 'preference'. If the learner is not aware of the rule, he might write 'occured' and 'transfered' instead of 'occurred and transferred'.

(6) Errors that may be attributed to the difference between British and American English: For instance, 'inflexional' (British) and 'inflectional' (American); this might lead a spelling such as 'infextional', which was found in one student's writing. However, the principle may be right, but Ibrahim's example is unfortunate since 'inflectional' is used in both countries.

(7) Some mistakes which defy categorisation: words such as 'accuse' for 'access' and 'indicant' for 'incident'. This fits into the category mentioned by Smith (1984) caused

by reading from right to left. This type of error is also discussed by Ryan (1993), whose explanation is discussed below.

This study is closely relevant to the current research because it deals with spelling mistakes in written work produced by specialist students at the English Department of Jordan University which is quite similar to the Syrian context, since some analysis of the present study involved spelling mistakes made by the subjects of the this research (See 5.4).

Though Ibrahim's study is detailed and attempts to be comprehensive in the classification of errors, there are some problems, as we have seen. Moreover, it does not provide information about the number of the subjects and whether they were at the same or different stage of learning English or even the number of spelling mistakes made by these subjects.

Haggan (1991) also analysed spelling mistakes made Arab learners writing in English at university level. The 87 subjects who constituted the main source of this study came from the English Department of Kuwait University, and all were native speakers of Arabic: 64 students were first year students following a 'remedial' writing course because of their low achievement on the Departmental Placement Test; and 23 students were in their final year of the writing class, with a minimum of 4 years spent in the English Department.

Spelling mistakes were drawn from final examinations scripts; this writing was called 'spontaneous' because the use of dictionaries was not allowed. The spelling mistakes collected from first and fourth year students were in total 405, 98 and 207 respectively.

These errors were grouped under 8 major categories, with subdivisions among each category, as follows (For further detail of full classifications see Haggan 1991: 48-54): Haggan's category system is clearer than Ibrahim's since it is based on spelling faults rather than reasons for errors.

*Category 1: consonant doubling errors:* Common errors were such as ‘swiming’ for swimming, ‘prefered’ for preferred and ‘realy’ for really.

*Category 2: other consonant errors:* errors found here were such as ‘conclution’ for conclusion (*t* being used instead of *s*) and ‘sentense’ for sentence (*s* being used instead of *c*)

*Category 3: errors involving schwa:* Errors were found here were such as ‘unfamilier’ for familiar (*e* being used instead of *a*) and ‘collages’ for colleges (*a* being used instead of *e*)

*Category 4: errors involving silent e:* Errors were found here involved the addition of an unnecessary final *e* such as ‘playe’ for play and ‘withe’ for with.

*Category 5: Other vowel errors:* Errors found here were such as ‘incloud’, ‘conclound’ and ‘indix’ for include and conclude and index respectively

*Category 6: letter misordering:* Errors found here were such as ‘qoutation’, ‘ingore’ and ‘breif’ for quotation, ignore and brief respectively (see Smith 1984 who noted a similar problem).

*Category 7: unanalysable:* Errors found here were those such as ‘neocliar’ for nuclear and ‘countenio’ for continue.

*Category 8: homophones:* Errors found here were those such as the confusion between ‘there’ and ‘their’ in both directions.

Comparing the errors made by both groups, three points can be mentioned.

(1) *Errors occurring less frequently in advanced students:* One of the categories exhibiting significant improvement, for instance, was category 4, which involves errors in the final *e*. Likewise the confusion over homophones was reduced at advanced students level.

(2) *Errors demonstrating insignificant differences between Fourth Year and Remedial students*: Category 1, which involved consonant doubling errors, seemed not to be affected by more exposure to the language.

(3) *Errors occurring more frequently in advanced students*: Category 3, for example, (errors involving schwa), had a relative large number of errors which can be accounted for, Haggan suggests, by the use of more ‘ambitious vocabulary’. A similar finding is found in the current research in the sense that some errors in the first year did not appear or were reduced in number in the fourth year, while some other errors in the first year continued to appear in the fourth year; extended exposure to language learning appeared not to reduce these errors (for further discussion see 5.4).

Moreover, Haggan pointed out two general conclusions from his analysis. First, both groups of subjects made a significant number of spelling mistakes due to their ignorance of the rule or pattern. Second, spelling and pronunciation are relatively ‘intertwined’.

Another study from an ESL context comes from Ryan (1993) who suggested that Arabic-speaking learners of English tend to confuse English words that have a similar consonants structure such as ‘step’ and ‘stop’, which are distinguished only by the vowel phonemes. The reason behind this confusion, Ryan suggests, is that the learners are less accurate when representing vowels than consonants and may not be aware of the role played by the vowels in English word structure. In Arabic, words are based on a root that usually consists of three consonants, and these consonants can be combined with different patterns of vowels to produce a complete family of words that have a common and similar meaning. In contrast, in Indo-European languages words tend to be made of a ‘relatively stable root’ and a system of affixes that are added to this root. Thus the various experiments that Ryan carried out on different groups of Arab learners ( mainly from Saudi Arabia attending training courses at University of Wales in Swansea) revealed that they had a tendency to make more spelling mistakes involving vowels than learners of other L1 background.

Though Ryan's research is not directly related to the current research, it is briefly reported here because it can offer explanations for some of the spelling mistakes made by the subjects of the current research.

### 3.4.3 Problems of adverbs

A specific problem which is often mentioned in research on Arab learners concerns the use of adverbs in English. Little research, according to my modest knowledge, has been done relative to ESL errors in adverbs. This section is limited to the report of one study carried out by Dissosway and Hatford (1984), and initial analysis of some exam scripts by Meygle (1994). The former study investigated how non-native speakers misuse or misunderstand adverbs and then discussed how those problems are dealt with in grammar books. Discussion is limited to words which were traditionally labelled 'adverbs'. Thus other kinds of adverbial adjuncts such as 'however', two-part verbs, such as 'cross out', and other kinds of adverbs are not considered in this study.

There were two separate sources of data for adverb errors: (1) A short-term longitudinal study of 2 low and intermediate classes and (2) A cross-sectional study of a placement test for an English as SL programme with students of all levels of proficiency in English; 22 Arab subjects selected out of 123 non-native speakers who took the Indiana University Test. The students were asked to write on one of four topics in 35 minutes; their writing consisted of 3-5 paragraphs.

The authors classified adverb errors in three basic categories: (1) Misplacement, (2) Constituent Confusion and (3) Inappropriate Usage. The three categories could be subcategorised (for further detail of the examples in each category see Dissosway and Hartfold 1984: 1-29). In subcategory I, three types of errors were found, but they were limited in number: single adverbs '*only*', duplication '*here and here*' and using two adverbs contiguously '*especially*' and '*also*' for instance).

In subcategory II, adverbs were used where another constituent was more appropriate; 9 examples out of 11 had an adverb for an adjective ('clearly' for 'clear' for example).

Subcategory II shows more variety. Phrases of time and place such as ‘in last year’ and ‘to here’ were used where an adverb alone would have been adequate.

The final category, Inappropriate Usage, had more subcategories such as spelling (for example, ‘*their*’ for ‘*there*’) semantic conflict between adverbs and verbs and confusion involving idioms and fixed expressions.

In analysing some grammar books (29 texts), the authors mentioned that almost all the errors reported above are covered in the grammar books. However, one particular area, namely the basic notion of adverb as a part of speech in its own right and its nature, is neglected. Thus without a clear concept of an adverb as a functional unit, they argue, the student who must learn how to use adverbs is forced to rely on either the native language or second language training he has received. In this respect we might get undesirable results. For example, translation yields inappropriate results with respect to idioms or fixed expressions because they are language specific. Another problem is the transfer of training where students are told to add ‘-ly’ to an adjective to make an adverb; this case leads to confusion between adverbs and adjectives because there are adjectives that also end in ‘-ly’, like ‘friendly’.

To avoid possible confusion between adverbs and other constituents (in particular adjectives), we should give special focus to the question of what they modify; only adverbs can modify an entire sentence in addition to other sentence-internal constituents. Only 2 out of 29 textbooks the authors investigated even mentioned the notion of sentence modification. The point they raise here is not to reject what the texts have to offer, but to recognise that students need more instruction on the function of adverbs at an early stage to minimise errors transferred from training and from language interference from Arabic, and to build a framework into which the essential element of categorisation, *Placement* and *Usage*, can be incorporated.

In an analysis by the present researcher (Meygle 1994, unpublished) of some exam scripts in English which go back to the early 90s written by university students in the

second, third and fourth year at the English Department in Syria (15 scripts, 5 for each year), the results showed low percentages of adverbial usage, in particular of single adverbs in various categories: 2.4% for single adverbs and 5% to prepositional phrases. Despite the fact that the corpus analysed is small (3785 words long) which limits any general finding, nevertheless these results tentatively confirm what Smith has pointed out about the infrequent use of adverbs by Arabic speakers writing in English.

In general, the students preferred to use prepositional phrases rather than single adverbs as in the following examples:

‘in an easy and comfort way’ (used more than 4 times by the same subjects) rather than ‘easily and comfortably’, ‘in its sadness’ rather than ‘sadly’ and ‘in a legal way’ rather than ‘legally’. The most likely explanation for this is that the students translate directly and literally from Arabic.

Further analysis relative to adverbs reveals some errors made by the students as follows:

(a) Misplacement: For instance, the students misplaced time adverbs before place adverbs and they also misplaced some adverbs of frequency as in:

1. ‘... makes us know what happens *at this moment in France*’.
2. ‘Man goes *from the early morning to his work*’.
3. ‘Feminist critics raised *hardly* against the Freudian theories’.

(b) Confusion with other word classes such adjectives: Adverbs were used instead of adjectives as in:

4. ‘The more *happily day*’ instead of ‘the *happier day*’.

(c) Confusion of Spelling: ‘*beside*’ instead of ‘*besides*’.

(d) Wrong Usage of prepositions in prepositional phrases as in

5. ‘*in* many levels’, ‘*in* the level of travel’, ‘*on* travel’, ‘*on* air’.



These errors in prepositions can be accounted for by L1 influence since all the above phrases are literal translations from Arabic.

#### **3.4.4 Stylistic errors in writing by Arab learners (Doushaq 1986)**

In this section I review a study carried out by Doushaq, to which I give special emphasis because of its relevance to the Syrian students and because it deals with a quite large number of subjects. Doushaq's (1986) and the current research involve the analysis of written products at tertiary level, though with different orientations. Doushaq examined the essays written by Arab students learning English for academic purposes in Jordan. The purpose of this study was to examine the writing difficulties of Jordanian students at tertiary level. Further, he examined the students' performance in L1 compared with that of L2, and the possibility of a positive 'reversed transfer' from L2 to L1. This involved the students' command of writing techniques in Arabic and to what extent it is manifested in English writing and vice-versa.

The sample in the study consisted of 96 students chosen randomly. They were divided into four groups as follows:

Group one: first year science students who had just finished studying the ESP course at the Language Centre.

Group two: second year students majoring in English

Group three: fourth year students majoring in English

Group four: fourth year students majoring in Arabic

The last three groups did not take the ESP program, but they were given an orientation English program which was replaced in 84/85 by ESP.

The first three groups were asked to write an essay in English on the topic: 'The Value of Higher Education in the Developing Countries to Individuals and to Society,

with Special Reference to Jordan'. A week later, all four groups were asked to write an essay in Arabic on the same topic mentioned above. Doushaq gives two reasons why the fourth group only wrote in Arabic. First, their future need for learning English for academic purposes was less than the other groups. Second, their compositions were used as a control for the performance of the other groups in Arabic essay.

Thus the overall data consisted of 174 essays: 78 in English and 96 in Arabic.

The students' essays were rated according to ten categories as follows:

- (1) Essay Organization
- (2) Sequencing of Ideas
- (3) Content Quality
- (4) Development of Ideas
- (5) Subject Unity
- (6) Paragraph Unity (both Ideational and Physical)
- (7) Coherence (use of transitional phrases, logical connectives and other rhetorical devices)
- (8) Appearance Including Indentation
- (9) Mechanics such as Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation
- (10) Lexis

The English essays were rated by two raters: the researcher and another TEFL specialist in order to avoid two types of bias: personal and cultural. The Arabic essays were scored by a colleague from the Arabic Department, who also supplied the researcher with valuable detailed comments. A scale of 10 marks was used in scoring each essay in both English and Arabic.

In general, the students' level of performance in English and Arabic was not good or even satisfactory. The average score of the four groups of essays written in Arabic was 5.8 out of 10 (58%); the average score for the three groups on essays written in English was 5 out of 10 (50%).

The results showed a correlation between students' writing ability in L1 and L2. (This is reported informally without the use of statistical measures.) A possible reason for the results in the writing skills in L2, Doushaq suggests, might be partially due to students' poor mastery of the writing skills in L1.

The results in English and Arabic reveal clearly some problems facing university students, grouped in three categories: (1) Problems at the sentence level, (2) Problems at the paragraph level and (3) Problems at the content level.

Unsurprisingly, all groups demonstrated better linguistic performance on the essays written in Arabic than those written in English. Relative to English, the fourth year group scored better than the other two groups. Regarding Arabic, the first year group (from the science faculty) scored better than the other groups. The reason behind this, Doushaq suggests, might be due to their general academic achievement; The faculties of Medicine and Engineering in Jordan require high scores from applicants in the Secondary School Examination.

The study highlights the following aspects of writing. Each item is dealt with separately.

- **Organization**

In general, organisation here means writing the essay in three main parts: Introduction, the body and conclusion. Added to this is the location of the main ideas and other ideas supporting them. Almost all the students exhibited a lack of understanding of how essays are organized by these criteria. A possible reason might be that the students seemed to have received insufficient instruction regarding this aspect, even in Arabic. Thus students' weaknesses in written English relative to organization, Doushaq suggests, can be accounted for by 'negative transfer' from Arabic, which is due in turn to a lack of training and practice during student school life. Many subjects demonstrated ignorance of the significance of ordering the ideas and discussion. In some cases students used a 'sequence' at the beginning of the essay, but they forgot to carry on with it throughout the essay.

- **Paragraph Unit**

Doushaq believes that a satisfactory paragraph unit includes the use of the topic sentence, followed by the supporting sentences *related to the main one*. Many students, in particular group two, failed to write a main topic sentence and if it was given, Doushaq claims that it was either too general or too specific. In addition, the link between the topic sentence and the supporting ones was not always clear. We must, however, reserve our judgement on this aspect of Doushaq's evaluation, since it is doubtful whether successful experienced native speaker writers always use topic sentences or use a three part structure in their essays.

- **Coherence**

Text coherence is essential for academic writing. Expert writers use a variety of ways to show the reader how the different parts of the essay are linked together. These methods include, among other things, logical connectives, transitional phrases and other rhetorical devices. According to Doushaq, the way in which the students wrote their essays revealed a shortage in the use of cohesive devices such as synonyms, repetition and substitution and in particular noun and verb substitutions. Frequently used devices found in Doushaq's data were 'and', 'but', 'while' and 'because'. Other connectors were scarcely used. Similar findings are found in the current study (See 5.1).

Surprisingly enough, Doushaq notes, the least coherent essays were those written in Arabic by group four (from the Arabic Department). By contrast, essays written in Arabic by 4th year English specialists were assessed as the most coherent writing in the study, though their writing in English was not as coherent as it should have been. Here Doushaq suggests that this is an example of 'positive reversed transfer' in the process of learning language skills. Students in the English Department, unlike the Arabic Department, are taught special courses in writing skills with focus on the stylistic aspects.

### **3.5 The relationship between reading and writing**

It is widely believed that reading as language input plays a certain role in helping learners to construct written texts. Although the link between reading and writing is not clearly defined, it has been claimed to be similar to the process of second language acquisition (SLA), hypothesised by Krashen, who believes that the development of both language proficiency and language ability is brought about, to a large extent, via 'comprehensible input', together with a low affective monitor. According to Krashen (1984: 20), writing ability is acquired subconsciously and readers are usually unaware that they are acquiring writing ability while they are reading. Further, Krashen appears to consider reading for pleasure or interest as the incentive behind developing writing competence, noting that 'It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose'.

There are three hypotheses as proposed by Eisterhold (1990) regarding the relation between reading and writing. These are briefly summarized below:

#### **(1) The directional hypothesis**

Reading and writing, according to the directional hypothesis, have similar elements in terms of structure, to the extent that what is acquired in one domain can be employed in the other. For instance, a reader who could understand the language of comparison and contrast in reading would be, relatively speaking, on the way to mastering the same techniques in writing. The standard model in this theory claims that skills move in a reading to writing direction: reading presumably affects writing more than writing affects reading.

#### **(2) The non-directional hypothesis**

Some researchers have not found a directional link, however, and the main argument of the non-directional claim is that both reading and writing are believed to have a common base, that is to say a single underlying proficiency or competence. Unlike the directional model, transfer might take place in either direction. Thus according to this model, any improvement in one domain, reading or writing, will lead to improvement in the other domain, writing or reading.

### (3) The bi-directional hypothesis

The reading and writing relationship in the bi-directional model, is complex and multiple because as Shanahan (1984: 467) has noted, 'What is learned at one stage of development can be qualitatively different from what is learned at another stage of development'. Thus the key elements in this model are change and development.

In summary, the directional model emphasises the input and stresses the importance of good reading as the basis of good writing; the non-directional lays emphasis on shared

and common underlying competence between reading and writing (the direction is not important) and the bi-directional focuses on the fact that transfer of skills varies according to students' maturity, giving special emphasis to development and interaction.

#### **3.5.1 Reading for pleasure and writing**

In this section, I review some research relative to the relationship between reading and writing.

- **Donalson**

One of the earliest studies into the reading-writing relationship was by Donalson (1967), who examined the factors or 'variables' that make a distinction between 'effective and ineffective writers'. He chose for his study the tenth grade for two reasons: (1) it appeared to be a reasonable demarcation between effective and ineffective writing and (2) to reduce the age factor. The subjects who participated in this study were 1821 tenth grade students who came from three different high schools in a mid western city. They were asked to write on three different topics: one narrative, one expository and one argumentative. Writing was done in the classroom and the use of a dictionary was allowed. Then a questionnaire of 68 items was given to 124 effective writers and 127 ineffective writers. The items in the questionnaire were related to factors such as parent's job and education, students' personal data and English class activities and school classes.

The results of analysis showed that factors such as parent's education and occupation and parent's reading of a foreign language and the number of books and magazines read at home were significant factors distinguishing between effective and ineffective writers. However, one major factor was whether or not the students were keen readers. Effective writers tended to be keen readers.

Donalson (1967: 41) concludes that the effective writers appeared to be 'female, living in a favoured home, readers, and fond of English and school in general'.

- **Krashen**

Krashen also regards voluntary pleasure reading as enhancing writing ability. In a group study, carried out in 1978, to investigate the issue of the reading- writing relationship (reported in Krashen 1984:4), a questionnaire was given to 66 freshmen who were asked to write an essay at home, which was later assessed by 2 raters. Only two types of essay were kept for further analysis: the 'highly competent' and 'of low competence'. The questionnaire told students to show the amount of pleasure reading they had done at different periods of time in their lives. The students' responses revealed that good writers read more for pleasure at all ages, in particular during the high school period. Among the poor writers, not even one reported that they did a lot of reading for pleasure.

- **Hafiz and Tudor**

Clear evidence and support for reading-writing relationship comes from Hafiz and Tudor (1989). They designed a study to examine whether extensive reading for pleasure could influence students' command in L2. The study consisted of 3 groups of ESL learners studying in the United Kingdom: one experimental group (consisting of 16 ESL learners, originally from Pakistan, learning in Leeds schools) and two control groups (one consisting of 15 ESL learners from the same school as the experimental group and the other consisting of 15 ESL learners from a different school in the Leeds area).

All groups were given a NFER Test of proficiency in English (National Foundation for Educational Research), which involved reading and writing. They were rated according to NFER manuals (For further detail see Hafiz and Tudor 1989, Appendix 1:12). The same tests were given to all groups 3 months later, that is the end of the extensive reading programme which lasted for 12 weeks. Attendance was basically optional, but students were strongly recommended to attend. Tests were done during students' class times. The scores obtained from these tests were used to compare the linguistic command of the experimental group and the control groups both before and after the 'experimental treatment'. More specifically, the comparison was made to see the influence of the extensive reading programme on the linguistic command of the experimental group.

Apart from taking the NFER Tests, the control groups did not receive any special treatment. Only the experimental group received the treatment of reading programme for 12 weeks. The students were given a selection of graded reading books and were given the choice to read anything they liked during the class. They were further allowed to take books home if they liked. Moreover, the students were told to give an oral presentation once a week relative to their reactions towards this programme. The atmosphere was relaxed and non-threatening.

The results revealed clearly that the experimental group remarkably performed better between pre-and post-test when compared with those of the two control groups. On pre-testing, the experimental group scored lower on reading and writing than the control groups, but on post-test the situation became totally different. The experimental group obtained higher scores than the control groups on both reading and writing, with remarkable improvement on the writing test. A possible explanation for this improvement is that the extensive reading programme had brought about such an improvement; this thus supports Krashen's claim regarding input-hypothesis which can lead to an improvement in the learner's linguistic skills, at least reading and writing.



Two possible reasons can be given for the improvement in writing skills, the authors suggest. First, students learned from the wide range of books they read, which they later employed to various degrees in their writing. Secondly, reading for pleasure may have increased the students' motivation and led to better attitudes towards the target language.

- **Lai 1993**

Another study from an ESL context comes from Lai (1993) who examined the effects of a summer reading course on reading comprehension and writing skills. This course of summer reading was not free; the students who followed it had to pay for it. The summer reading course ran from 9 in the morning to 11:30 before noon, Monday to Friday for 4 weeks. Apart from the whole-class activities such as reading funny stories, singing songs and playing language games, there was an extensive reading course which was carried out at the learners' pace with books of their own interests, under the supervision of the course teacher.

When the students completed the reading course, they were given the same two tests they had taken at the start. Further, S3 students were asked to write a composition on 'My Family' at the beginning and end of the course; this is similar to what Hafiz and Tudor (1989) had done. Both essays were assessed according to three variables: word count, error-free T-units and style.

Here I only report results relative to writing skills. The analysis revealed clearly that all S3 subjects had written more in both the overall number of words and error-free T-units. The increase in number of words was remarkable: the most competent one increased from 236 to 287 words and the poorest one from 9 to 23 words. This is in conformity with the findings reported by Hafiz and Tudor (1989).

In terms of error-free T-units, the improvement was basically made by the more competent students. The average error-free T-units increased from 6.6 to 7.4.

In terms of style and content of essays (based on 100 marks), the results have indicated that the second essay was better than the first for a large number of students.

This study concludes that the summer reading course had its positive effects on writing for many students, in particular the proficient students.

- **Illo**

A single study, unlike other studies, seemingly did not report any link between pleasure reading and writing, but no details are available of this research. Illo (1976), in his study of freshmen at Shippensburg State College, claimed that the pleasure reading relationship appeared 'weak and uncertain' (reported by Krashen 1984: 5).

### **3.5.3 The use of reading information in writing**

#### **Campbell**

In this section, I review Campbell's (1990) study of 'Writing with others' words: Using background reading text in academic writing'. Campbell (1990: 211) states that 'Successful academic writing involves, among other things, the ability to integrate information from previous researchers in relevant areas of study'. The aim of his study is to examine how, giving the same assignment, native and non-native speaker university students employ information from a reading text in their writing. This description includes various methods such as direct quotations, paraphrases and summaries, as well as the function and location of textual information in the student papers.

The subjects of this study are 30 students who were enrolled in various composition courses at UCLA's College of Letters and Science in America. They were 20 non-native speakers of English divided equally in two groups and 10 native speakers of English. The samples for this study were chosen randomly. The students were classified into three groups: (1) less proficient non-native speakers, (2) more proficient non-native speakers and (3) standard-level native speaker students,

according to their scores in English Composition Achievement Test which were (on average) 298, 337 and 476 respectively.

The subjects of this study were given the same reading/writing task by the instructors of composition classes. The task was to read for homework the first chapter of an undergraduate anthropology textbook by Harris (1933). The students were told that this chapter would be used as background reading for a writing assignment that involved the use and explanation of terminology from the anthropology text, to which they were allowed to refer during their writing (For further information about the topic see Campbell 1990: 215). The students were given one class hour to write a first draft, which was used for the data analysis.

The sections out of each composition produced by the 30 students in which there were traces of the reading text were isolated and marked. These sections were classified by raters according to type, function, location and type of documentation.

To control the composition length, sections of each composition were selected and references to the source text were classified under the following types: Quotation, Exact Copy, Near Copy, Paraphrase, Summary, or Original Explanation. Only the Quotation category included exact quotation with quotation marks with a direct reference to the original author. Exact Copies were direct quotations without quotations marks. Near Copies were similar to Exact Copies with the addition of some syntactic re-arrangement. Paraphrases included more syntactic changes than Near Copies. Summaries represented the gist of the information. Original Explanations constituted explanations of some technical terms in the students' own words.

It was found that all three student groups used considerably more information from the source text in the final paragraph of their composition than in the body paragraphs. But concerning the first paragraph of their compositions, the two non-native speaker groups used considerably more information from the source text than

the native speakers. In the body paragraphs, all groups of students used some information from the source text in addition to their own ideas.

This study, Campbell suggests, has not revealed any sign of the students' 'meta-awareness to copying or plagiarism'. Therefore he assumes that 'writing is such a complex process that attention cannot easily be given to everything at the same time. ... To include information from written sources without violating conventions of acceptability is even more difficult' (p.221). Further, the students may possess the ability to integrate information from a source text, but that ability may not be exhibited under time pressure and classroom constraints. Nevertheless all the students demonstrated their ability to reasonably paraphrase and summarise information.

In general, few references were made to the author or text. The non-native speakers provided more reference in footnotes than native speakers, while the native speakers acknowledged their references by using phrases. The reasons behind the lack of acknowledgement by non-native speakers, Campbell suggests, might be because students were unaware of the convention, or they ignored it because they thought it was unnecessary to refer to since it was only a single reference, with which their instructors were fully familiar.

None of the students, native or non-native speakers, appeared to possess a mastery of the appropriate means of referencing to another author.

In terms of holistic scoring, the native speaker compositions received higher scores than the non-native speaker compositions; this was due to the fact that the language, style, and tone were more consistent and more academic.

Campbell concludes that we should raise the students' awareness of and respect for other authors which would enable them in the long run to integrate information from a reading text appropriately in their own writing. In this respect, reference might be made to Bloor and Bloor (1991) who have provided evidence that ESL students' expectations at tertiary level are greatly influenced by their cultural backgrounds,

which can result in many cases in 'socio-pragmatic failure' in their written essays. Issues such as 'plagiarism', 'acknowledgements' and 'directness and concession' are possible examples where overseas students have problems when they write in English because they are culturally specific. Further they emphasised the role the teacher can play in assisting these students to overcome such problems.

### **3.5.4 Interrelationships between reading and writing**

Crowhurst (1991) designed a study to examine the following: (1) whether writing might be improved by teaching, and (2) the influence of reading on writing and of writing on reading. He restricted his study by focusing on writing with one function: persuasion. He termed this 'the persuasive mode'.

The subjects were 100 sixth graders in a middle-class suburban area, equally divided into 4 groups (25 each)- three experimental groups and one control group as follows: Group (1) received instruction in a model for persuasion plus writing practice, group (2) received instruction in the model for persuasion plus reading practice, group (3) practised reading novels and writing book reports plus a single lesson in the persuasion model, and group (4) simply read novels and wrote book reports (control group).

The materials for this study were written by the researcher; they were two persuasive texts (Marvellous Manitoba and Los Angeles), each containing 159 propositions. Printed assignment sheets were prepared for the 4 writing tasks which were used as writing pre-test and post-tests (for further information see Crowhurst 1991: 336). There was, in addition to the four writing tasks (carried out in two pre-tests and 2 post-tests), a reading test. Students were told to read the passage carefully, to turn the page on the desk after finishing and to write whatever they could recall.

The writing pre-test and post-test each required students to write two persuasive essays (a total of 4 essays), each of which was written on a separate day. Instruction lasted for 45 minutes twice a week for five weeks.

Regarding writing scores, they were holistically rated according to a 6-point scale relative to the overall quality, organisation, and counts of some other structural elements.

Concerning reading evaluation, it was based on the count of the number of propositions recalled by each subjects.

The results clearly revealed that instruction improves writing; since both writing and reading groups improved considerably in terms of writing quality from pre-test to post-test, and both groups scored higher than the control group on the post-test.

Regarding the influence of reading on writing, results provided 'modest support'. The reading group demonstrated considerable improvement in writing quality and in the organisation of their essays, and achieved higher scores than the control group on quality and organisation on the post-test.

But with respect to the influence of writing on reading, results did not show any clear support.

An important finding of this study, Crowhurst suggests, is that the significant improvement in writing was brought about by the reading group though they did not do any writing practice at all. Improvement in writing usually takes place slowly. Thus if wider reading improves writing, he argues, such an improvement might be expected to occur only over long periods. The fact that students transferred knowledge obtained from reading and instruction to writing is further evidence for the general claim that reading can affect writing.

These studies of the reading-writing relations are relevant to the current research because in the questionnaire and interviews students mentioned that reading and writing are closely related, with reading affecting writing rather than vice versa. Furthermore, the research provides clear evidence of the influence of reading on the development of lexis (See 6.2.3).

### **3.6 Feedback on students' writing**

It is widely believed and is repeatedly claimed that feedback, oral or written, plays an important role, whether positively or negatively, in students' writing. Teachers, of course, provide feedback because they wish to provide assistance to the student writers. However, many questions have been raised about feedback such as: What type of feedback is most effective? and do students learn from correction? In this section, discussion addresses some aspects of feedback as follows: Types of feedback, teacher's feedback, students' reactions to teacher's feedback, the impact of teacher's feedback on students' writing, treatment of written errors, and peer feedback.

#### **3.6.1 Types of feedback**

It has been reported in the literature relative to writing teaching that there are three main types of feedback: the writing conference, written commentary and taped commentary, but discussion in this section is only limited to the first two types because they are widely used and most practical. Further, taped commentary is not applicable in the context of the current research because it requires appropriate technology as well as small classes (as suggested by Hyland 1990), and neither of these are available in the Syrian context for the time being at least.

##### **(1) The writing conference**

The 'writing conference' is used to refer to the verbal interaction between the teacher and student inside the classroom or 'face to face conversation' between the tutor and learner, as discussed by Hedge (1988: 154). This can be done individually or collectively. Most writers on this topic, however, favour the one-to-one discussion session.

The writing conference, according to some authors such as Keh (1990) and Arndt (1993), is an effective and successful strategy in writing pedagogy in all phases of learning, primary to college. The success of this activity could be ascribed to one or more of a number of factors:

(i) The psycho-affective aspect of the one-to-one writing conference has been singled out by many authors. For instance, Freedman and Sperling (1985: 106) believe that

since these conferences occur 'away from classroom activity', the teacher and student are in a better position to address not only academic but personal writing difficulties. Further, Wallace (1994: 35) points out that a non-threatening atmosphere should be created and established between the teacher and the learner so that the latter can feel relaxed and be encouraged to talk freely and frankly, revealing his writing problems and concerns. This is most useful for shy students who cannot express themselves in front of their peers inside the classroom. Moreover, Keh (1990) pointed out that the writing conference, as a 'non-directive approach', has many advantages. For example, there will be an interaction between the teacher and the student. Since the teacher is a 'live' reader, he can ask questions for clarification, monitor the understanding of oral comments and help the student sorting out some problems. Compared with teachers' written comments, Keh adds, writing conferences give an opportunity for more accurate feedback to be provided on the spot.

In response to Keh's questionnaire item 'What has been the most significant thing you've learnt from the conferences?', the majority of her Chinese students reported that 'word-choice', 'organization', 'grammar', and 'reader awareness' were very important aspects. Further, students indicated that in addition to writing skills, their speaking skills in English had improved as well. Moreover, students valued these conferences because they helped them build up their confidence.

(ii) The learning side of the writing conferences has been also pointed out by many authors. Arndt (1993: 104), for example, when comparing them with the comments written by teachers, considers the writing conference as a 'dynamic and 'two-way' interaction, which complements the teachers' written comments, which are 'static' and 'one-way'. Hedge (1988: 154), further, points out that such conferencing provides good opportunities for teachers to learn about their students, when she says, 'It gives a chance to listen, learn and diagnose'.

Despite its success, the writing conference is limited by many things such as time and the student-teacher relationship. Arndt (1993), for instance, mentions that the writing conference needs extra time for preparation. Moreover, Freedman and Sperling



(1985: 107) observe that these conferences are ‘constrained by the teacher student relationship and the relative status of one to the other’.

Nevertheless, positive reactions from teachers and students have been reported in the related literature. Leki and Carson (1994: 93), for example, in their investigation of former ESL students attitudes toward usefulness of the EAP writing courses they followed in their first and second university years, reported that many students expressed their plea ‘for more individualized consideration both administratively and within the EAP classes’.

## **(2) Teacher written commentary**

‘Teacher written comments’ are those comments written by teachers in the margins or between the lines and at the end of students’ compositions.

Teacher written comments, according to Leki (1990: 58), are likely to be the most dominant kind of feedback on students’ writing. This might be due to the fact that, she suggests, teachers view their comments as ‘more feasible and more thorough than conferences on every paper’. Further, she argues that the special nature of the teaching job needs some form of ‘justified evaluation’. In either case, Zamel (1985: 79) has indicated that teacher comments affect the way students revise their texts, positively or negatively.

Another point can be added here. It is related to the affective aspects of teacher’s written comments. In ‘Anguish as a Second Language? Remedies for Composition Teachers’, Raimes (1983a: 88) points out the significance of ‘praise’ when grading students’ essays. She reports Diederick (1974: 20) when saying, ‘... noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly’. Ferris (1995: 49) rightly suggests that ‘constructive criticism’ should be combined with praising comments.

### **3.6.2 The impact of teacher's comments on students' writing**

Some researchers such as Zamel (1985) have reported that teachers' written comments had negative effects, while others such as Fathman and Whalley (1990) have reported positive effects. The coming section deals with this issue.

- **Zamel**

Zamel (1985) undertook research into writing feedback and its effectiveness. Zamel found teachers' comments to be useless or even dangerous on occasion. Zamel examined the actual responses made by 15 teachers on students' writing. The analysis covered 105 texts written by ESL students. The results of her study, Zamel suggests, give support to previous research relative to teachers' comments on students' writing in L1. 'ESL writing teachers misread students' texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text' (p.86). Further, Zamel argues that teachers consider the text as a series of distinct sentences, rather than one unit of discourse, when they focus on 'surface-level' aspects of writing. To support her argument, Zamel quotes from examples of teachers' comments which misread students' actual intentions or were vague and even contradictory. (Examples are quoted from students' writing by Zamel 1985: 86, 91 and 93):

'... There are moments when you think everything is going wrong and no body care about you. On does moments that you are really...'

The expression 'On does moments' was misread by the teacher and changed into 'one moment' while in reality 'on does moments' stood for 'on these moments' for this particular student, a fact Zamel realised when the student read his text aloud. Further, the teacher's suggestion made the text less coherent than the student's original text. His intention was to write 'on these moments' which is closely related to the previous sentence.

In Zamel's opinion comments such as 'What do you mean?', 'Can you say this more concisely?' and 'Be careful with run-ons', which are frequent in teachers' comments on students' writing, are instances of vague and abstract responses that are of little use, or are even useless, when students revise their texts. Zamel also points to contradictions in teachers' comments.

Another point can be added here. Zamel observes in her investigation that revisions made by the students were limited to grammatical corrections and approved by teachers, leaving important points relating to content and organisation unchanged, but teachers often approved such corrections.

Zamel concludes her research by suggesting a range of possibilities for improving teachers' comments on students' writing. For example, teachers should study their responding behaviours, which require a 'radical' change so that students can revise their writing in a better way. Students should be given time and chance to apply teachers' comments in redrafting their texts. Moreover, a collaborative relationship with students should be founded where teachers and students are in a better position to 'negotiate and interchange' their intentions of writing and explore the underlying meaning of what might appear to be incoherent or incomprehensible.

In brief, 'we should respond not so much to student *writing* but to student *writers*' as put by Zamel (1985: 97).

On the same line of research, Keh (1990: 101) suggests several procedures to avoid 'writing ineffective or inefficient comments'. For instance, the teacher should respond as an interested reader, 'not a grammarian or grade-giver'. Another way is to limit comments to some essential problems, those of 'high-order concerns' for instance, taking into account that students cannot focus on everything at the same time.

- **Fathman and Whalley**

Fathman and Whalley (1990: 181) carried out research relative to teacher feedback to answer the following questions:

1. How effective is teacher feedback that focuses on *form* on one hand and on *content*, [emphasis is mine] on the other hand in improving students' writing?
2. When should teachers provide feedback that focuses on form versus content?

72 students who were registered in intermediate ESL college composition classes at two different colleges participated in this study. Students were asked to write for 30 minute on a certain topic. Then students were divided into four groups, where each group received a different kind of teacher feedback on their writing as follows: G1 received no comment, G2 received grammar feedback only, G3 received just content feedback and G4 received both grammar and content feedback. Grammar feedback only located grammatical mistakes without any clue on how to correct them. Content feedback consisted of general comments that were not 'text specific'.

The original essays written by students were given back to students with one of the four types of teacher feedback mentioned above. All students were told to rewrite their essays in 30 minutes taking into account the feedback received.

Both the original essays and the revised ones were graded by two independent raters and given scores for grammar and content. The grammar grading was based on the number of grammatical mistakes in each essay; a low score indicated good grammatical accuracy and vice versa.

The content grading used a holistic procedure of 1-20 points, based on organization, description, coherence and creativity. Unlike the grammar score, a high score indicated better content.

The average grammar and content score on both the essays (the original and revised) was calculated for every subject in the four groups.

The analysis demonstrates that grammar and content feedback, alone or simultaneously, had positive effects on the revised essays. Pointing out the location of

grammatical errors was found effective in increasing grammatical accuracy. Further, grammar feedback in this study was more effective in helping students to correct grammatical mistakes than was content feedback. This might be, the authors suggest, due to the fact that the content feedback was too general while the grammar feedback was more specific in locating errors.

The results of this study relative to content feedback indicate that feedback helped students improve the content of their revised essays. Additionally, the analysis did not indicate any difference in the students' improvement when content and grammar feedback are given at the same time or when content feedback is given alone.

### **3.6.3 Students' reactions to teachers' feedback**

The research into students' attitudes to teachers' written comments is inconclusive because different researchers have had very different results. It is difficult to evaluate this research on the basis of most reports because it is so difficult to understand the reasons for differences in student responses. Negative attitudes might be a genuine response to poor quality comments by the teacher, whereas positive attitudes might reflect excellent teaching. In this section, I review some relevant research reported by Leki (1990), plus three studies regarding students' reactions to teacher's feedback.

In her review of some studies relative to the students' reactions to teachers' written comments in an ESL context, Leki (1990) mentioned some possibilities. According to Semke (1984), reported in Leki (1990), comments that do not show errors or weak points affect students' attitudes positively, while students revealed 'hostility' and negative attitudes toward those comments highlighting errors and weak points.

Another investigation of ESL students' attitudes (Leki 1986 reported in Leki 1990) reported that students preferred their teachers to correct every mistake they made and they accepted the clues made by their teachers which assisted them in correcting mistakes by themselves. Nevertheless, students did not like the 'content' comments made by their teachers because they felt that they were useless for improving their writing whereas Fathman and Whalley (1990) reported that comments on

organization and error identification helped students improve their writing. Further, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) found that students were satisfied with the feedback they received by their teachers. The last study is reported in detail in the coming section.

Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990: 156) carried out three small case studies: an EFL institute study, an L1 university study and an EFL university study (the three studies were conducted in Brazil). The aim of this research was to answer the following research questions:

1. What do language teachers focus on in giving feedback on written compositions in an advanced L1 or FEL writing course?
2. What feedback do students report that they usually get from the teacher? What are students' attitudes toward this feedback and what preferences might they have?
3. How do they handle the feedback they receive? What are the strategies they use?

There were two groups of subjects: (1) three skilful teachers of writing (all were female) and (2) nine students (3 students were chosen by each teacher: one 'high performer', one 'intermediate performer' and one 'low performer').

The data for this research consisted of: teacher and student verbal protocol, teacher and student questionnaires, interviews with students in the L1 study, and students' compositions written by the nine students on different topics, which ranged in length from 380 words in the case of 'high performers', to 270-280 words for the 'intermediate' and the 'low performers'.

Regarding the focus of teacher feedback, the analysis indicated a set of very complex results:

In the EFL Institute study, the teacher focused her comments on mechanics, grammar, vocabulary and organization, but intentionally not on content because content was not evaluated on the English language proficiency examination. These

comments actually highlighted weaknesses rather than strengths. In the University EFL study, the teacher focused on all categories, with special emphasis on content. As in the EFL institute study, the comments singled out weaknesses, except for one case which referred to a strength in 'the organization of ideas'. In the university L1 study, the teacher emphasised only accuracy of vocabulary and organization. As in the previous two studies the comments pointed out weaknesses rather than strengths.

With respect to students' attitudes toward teacher feedback in the EFL institute study, the 11 students and the three selected for the study mentioned that their teacher focused more on mechanics and grammar; some on vocabulary; less on organization and hardly at all on content. It seems that the matching between the teacher and students on recognizing the focus is not high. Whereas the teacher reported that she focused on organization, the students indicated that she provided only few comments on this category. Further, whereas the students reported that content was among the categories commented on by the teacher, the teacher herself clearly said that she did *not* on purpose include content because it was not assessed in the examination. Not including content in the feedback, the authors suggest, might de-motivate students toward the writing process.

Regarding their preferences for feedback, 5 out of the 11 students reported that they liked comments on content, 3 liked those on organisation, 2 on grammar and mechanics. In the case of the various levels of students, there was, again, considerable variation among individuals with respect to preferences and no consistent patterns emerged. The conformity between the teacher's reported feedback and the students' reactions with respect to feedback was the highest, when compared with the other two studies since both the teacher and the students indicated that the five categories had been emphasised.

Concerning the students' reactions to teacher comments in the university L1 study (they were 19 students), the majority of the students reported that the teacher feedback focused mainly on content, with some comments on organization, fewer on grammar and mechanics and still fewer on vocabulary even though the teacher stated

that she focused on organization and vocabulary. Only the three ‘high performers’ recognized that organization was the teachers’ main focus and even they did not mention vocabulary.

Regarding the student strategies in dealing with feedback in the EFL institute study, most of the students mentioned that they frequently made a mental note, identified the points they did not understand and asked the teacher for further explanation about these points, but they rarely consulted previous essays or grammar books. In case studies, regarding the strategy followed in relation to the comments they did not understand, a high performer mentioned that in one case he would ask his teacher and in another he would consult a grammar reference; the intermediate performer reported in two cases that he would ask the teacher, in two other cases ask a peer, and in one case consult a grammar reference; while the low performer mentioned that he would either consult a grammar reference or a dictionary.

In the University EFL study, the students in addition to the three ones in the case study followed similar strategies. Further, they rarely consulted previous compositions or rewrote their essays.

The main outcome of this complex and careful piece of research seems to be that individual students differ in their perceptions and preferences.

In a much simpler study, research carried out in an EFL context (Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey), by Enginarlar (1993) explored the attitudes of 47 freshman-level EFL students toward the feedback method adopted, in addition to some other aspects of writing, using a two-part questionnaire. The subjects of this study were asked in the questionnaire to rate the feedback procedure used by their instructors on a scale of 1-3 (1 being positive and 3 negative) in terms of given adjectives: ‘useful’, ‘necessary’, ‘didactic’ and ‘interesting’. This feedback procedure consisted of 4 elements:



1. An abbreviated code system for error identification related to various aspects of writing.
2. Some symbols showing problems in 'coherence', 'unity' and 'clarity'.
3. Short comments on the quality of writing.
4. General remarks in the form of short evaluative adjectives or phrases relative to students' progress on the course.

The results indicated that the majority expressed their satisfaction of the value and usefulness of the feedback procedure (89% and 93% respectively). In terms of 'necessity', the procedure was also rated high or moderate (68% and 32% respectively). But in terms of 'interest', it was rated low: only 30% of the students reported that the procedure was interesting, while the majority (60%) found it moderately interesting.

In another question, students were asked where they found the feedback procedure most helpful during their courses regarding the following: (1) grammar and mechanics, (2) composition skills and (3) both of these. Their responses to the three options were 24%, 27%, and 49% respectively.

In answer to the question relative to the effects of the teachers' comments on their essays, 98% of had positive reactions, noting that (quoted from students by Enginarlar 1993: 200): 'Writing comments have a lasting effect; I also think that the comments are not lowering (humiliating) us'. Similar findings emerged from the present study (see 8.1 and 8.2).

Enginarlar rightly wonders whether 'positively-oriented students will be better writers' (ibid. 203); this cannot be generalised before future research provides more solid support and confirmation.

In more recent research, Ferris (1995) surveyed 155 ESL students' reactions toward teacher feedback in multiple-draft essay classrooms. This multiple-draft method means that students are required to rewrite their essays two or three times at least,

taking into account their teachers' comments on each. These subjects, who come from Pacific rim nations and Mexico, were enrolled in 2 writing courses at California State University. In both courses a multiple-draft technique is employed by writing teachers. In terms of grading, students are aware that content and organisational features of writing are given more grades than sentence-level accuracy. The source of data was a questionnaire. The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Students mentioned that they reread their essays, paying special attention to teachers' comments on the early drafts.
2. Students reported that teachers' comments were on both language aspects and content and organisational features though more frequently on language aspects.
3. Students mentioned that they sought assistance in cases of confusion and ambiguity of comments from different sources such as teacher, peer, grammar book or dictionary.
4. Despite the fact that approximately 50% of the students mentioned that they had no problems in understanding teachers' comments, many students reported having specific problems relative to grammar (in terms of terminology and codes used), content and 'reading teachers' handwriting'.
5. Many students mentioned that they received encouraging comments from their teachers. Some students reported receiving negative comments, but seen as positive, while a few mentioned that they never had any positive comments from their teachers, which disheartened them.
6. The majority (93.5%) of the students believed that the feedback they received from their teachers had assisted them in improving their writing.

The majority of the findings of this study support previous research in L2 contexts such as Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) and Fathman and Whalley (1990).

In summary, two types of students' reactions were reported in the relevant literature: negative where students expressed their hostility to teacher's comments as in Semke (1984) and positive as in Enginarlar (1993) who has reported positive students' responses to teacher's written comments. In general, the context of learning and the relationships between teachers and students must affect students' reactions to their teacher's written comments. This is what makes very it difficult to generalise from the various research reports.

#### **3.6.4 Written feedback on errors**

In this section I discuss how errors are treated in written feedback in some studies.

A study carried out by Hendrickson (1979) explored the effects of two approaches to correction of written mistakes made by 24 ESL students enrolled in two sections of a non-credit ESL course at The Ohio State University. These approaches were the selective treatment (limited to global errors) in contrast to the total treatment (both local and global errors). The results of this study demonstrated that the total treatment of written errors over the six-week period had no significant advantage over the selective treatment in improving students' writing ability. Therefore it might be more useful, Hendrickson suggests, for both teachers and students to correct mistakes selectively by following 'direct' or 'indirect' methods depending on the students' language abilities and on the types and frequencies of mistakes.

Another study by Hendrickson (1979: 5) addressed five questions relative to error correction in both speech and writing. The questions and his suggestions are given below:

##### **1. Should learner errors be corrected?**

Despite the fact that no empirical evidence is found, it is widely believed, Hendrickson suggests, that error correction is of help to adult learners.

##### **2. When should learner errors be corrected?**

Hendrickson (1979) agrees with previous research regarding the idea that it was more essential to communicate successfully in a foreign language rather than to attempt to communicate perfectly in it. Further, according to Hendrickson, since there is not much research indicating when learner errors should be corrected, the teachers might decide which errors should be treated and which ones which should left uncorrected on the basis of communicative effectiveness.

### 3. Which learner errors should be corrected?

Many language teachers agree, Hendrickson suggests, that error correction should include three types of mistakes: errors that 'impair' understanding significantly, errors that have negative effects on the reader, and errors that occur very frequently.' (p. 11).

### 4. How should learner errors be corrected?

There are various ways of error correction such as a discovery approach, direct and indirect method, but there appears to be no standard or optimal way of dealing with errors, though Hendrickson encourages the selective approach as mentioned in the previous study.

### 5. Who should correct learners' errors?

It is argued that teacher correction of learners' errors is useful to many students, but it may not necessarily be an effective teaching method in all language classrooms. Peer-correction or self correction under teacher supervision, Hendrickson suggests, 'may be a more worthwhile investment of time and effort for some teachers and learners' (p. 18).

Norrish (1983) dealt with this issue in considerable detail. Of particular relevance is that Norrish has suggested several ways in which a teacher can deal with errors in writing. One way is to ignore mistakes in writing in the first place because 'it is very disheartening to students and teachers alike for a piece of work to be returned covered in red ink' (p. 71). Another way is to use 'peer-checking' because this will save the teacher time and provide students with the opportunity to take responsibility

in learning. Turning to actual correction of errors Norrish believes that it is very useful to adopt the code system which shows the location of errors and their types to the students. Since they have to interpret the code, this 'will involve them in more conscious assessment of what they have produced' (p.79), Norrish suggests. Another suggestion which is both practical and 'economical' is to focus on one particular aspect, 'the teaching point of the lesson or unit'. For instance, rather than correcting every single error made by students (which is time consuming and boring) a teacher can correct errors of a particular type.

Holes (1984) suggests another technique of dealing with students' errors in writing, namely 'text approximation'. He used this method to deal with the essay of a Yemeni student who was studying in Britain.

In this method of text approximation, students revise their writing three times, each time dealing with a certain kind of correction. *The first revision is limited to errors related to mechanics such as confusing punctuation or spelling. The second revision focuses on cohesive devices. The third revision concentrates on tone and style so that the text becomes close or similar to an English academic text (for full detail see Holes 1984: 228-242).* Although productive results were obtained with a single student, this is a complex system to introduce with large classes.

A study by Robb, Ross and Shotreed (1986) examined the advantages of different types of feedback on written errors of ESL students. The subjects who participated in this study were 134 Japanese college freshmen assigned to 4 groups. These students attended 23 classes over a period of one year (from April until January), with summer and winter vacations in between. All essay topics were the same for the 4 groups, but each group received a different type of feedback. The groups were: The correction group where the teacher corrected all errors in different aspects of writing; the coded group where the teacher used codes indicating the type of errors and students were required to correct for themselves; the uncoded group where the teacher only located errors without specifying their types; and the marginal group where the teacher only mentioned the number of errors per line in the margin (See Robb and Ross 1986:87).

The results of the analysis did not reveal any significant differences among the feedback groups though all students in 4 groups wrote more complex structures as the course progressed; this improvement was not due to the type of feedback, the authors suggest.

Thus this study concludes that ‘teachers can respond to student writing with comments that force the writer back to the initial stages of composing’ (p. 91).

In his ‘Providing Productive Feedback’, Hyland (1990) suggests ‘interactive feedback’ as an alternative to previous types. This involves using two methods of feedback: ‘minimal marking’ and ‘taped commentary’ based on collaborative team working. The former has the advantages of both saving the teacher time and avoiding the negative effect of the red ink for the students. This is similar to the selective approach recommended by Norrish (1983) and Hendrickson (1983). On a ‘taped commentary the teacher records his/her comments to be played back by the student. Taped commentary can be listened to at the students’ pace and is accessible when the students wish to go back to it. But this activity requires small classes as it is very time consuming and this is not relevant in the context of the current research.

Still another method of dealing with students’ errors in writing is ‘reformulation’ suggested by Allwright (1988) as an alternative technique to what she calls ‘spoonfeeding’ method where teachers spend most of their time correcting local errors. Reformulation in principle means that a native speaker of English reformulates or rewrites a written text in consultation with the non-native speaker writer, making some changes but keeping as much as possible to the original text. According to Allwright, reformulation deals with the main features of academic writing such as organisation, sign-posting, cohesion and clarity of meaning. Nevertheless, Allwright admits facing some problems in using this technique. Allwright’s students were overseas students in British universities and some felt that the demand made on them to reformulate their work was ‘unreasonable and unrealistic’.

Moreover, reformulation is time consuming and lacks practicality because it is not easy every time to find a native speaker to pair with the writer to reformulate students' writing, in particular in large classes as is the case in the context of the current study.

### **3.6.5 Peer review**

'Peer review' means that students themselves become readers of their classmates' written work, whether in pair or group work. It is only recently that researchers have started examining what is taking place in peer reviews and how these reviews influence L2 students' rewriting activities (Mendonca and Johnson 1994). In this section, I review two studies relative to peer reviews: one by Mangelsdorf (1992) and the second by Mendonca and Johnson (1994).

Mangelsdorf (1992) examined the issue of peer review in relation to some questions: (a) How useful are peer reviews for ESL essay students? (b) What are the advantages and disadvantages of this task? and (c) How should peer reviews be practised so that ESL students from different backgrounds and language abilities can best learn from this practice?

The students who participated in this research were 40 students registered in the first-semester freshman ESL composition course at the University of Arizona, which requires students to write a short, clear and coherent essay. These students came from different language backgrounds (number of students given in brackets): Spanish (10), Japanese (5), Arabic (4), French (2), Thai (2), Cantonese (2), Malay (2), Vietnamese (2), German (2), Indonesian (1), Urdu (1), Bulgarian (1), Polish (1), Gujarati (1), Somali (1), Greek (1) and Navajo (1). Their teachers were skilful ESL tutors who had received training in both first and second language composition teaching. Both teachers and students were asked to answer questions about peer reviews in writing, expressing their views on this activity.

The results of this study demonstrated that the majority of students and teachers considered peer reviews to be positive and helpful in re-drafting their essays. In terms

of improvement, the students reported that the areas most improved were ‘content’ and ‘organization’. In general, students’ responses indicate that ‘peer reviews can make students more aware of the needs and expectations of their audience, helping them to meet the demands of the writing classroom which their peers are reflecting to them’ (p. 278). For example, peer review helped students to adapt their texts ‘so that what is clear to the writer becomes clear to the reader as well’ (p.278). Further, peer reviews helped students to shift from the conventions of his/her native rhetoric to the conventions of English language rhetoric, as noted by a Japanese student.

Teachers’ perceptions of peer reviews were similar in many points. For instance, one teacher wrote that peer reviews ‘reinforce’ the issue that ‘communication, real audience and real purpose’ are the main purposes of writing. Further, peer reviews help students to become ‘better readers of their own writing, as noted by one teacher.

In this respect, Keh (1990) mentioned that ‘peer feedback’ has many advantages. For example, peer feedback saves teachers’ time on some tasks, releasing them for more useful instruction. Furthermore, peer feedback prepares students to write with a more specific focus since they know already that their classmates are also going to read their essays.

Nevertheless, both students’ and teachers’ comments revealed some problems with peer reviews. For example, some students lack trust in their peers’ criticism since the latter have the problem of being students. Another problem is that peers’ comments, similar to teachers’ written comments, are often ‘vague and general’.

Mangelsdorf (1992) suggests ways for improving peer review techniques. For instance, students should be trained in how to do peer reviews and how to make suggestions for revision; this can be done in pairs or groups depending on students’ familiarity with this activity. Further, students’ awareness of the real purpose of peer reviews, which is helping them revise their compositions by hearing various points of view, should be raised among themselves. Moreover, conferences can be held with students to ensure that students can differentiate between helpful and less helpful



comments from their peers, by giving special focus on how to deal with students' weaknesses.

Grouping students is one critical aspect of the peer reviews. Language ability levels, cultural backgrounds and content-topics are among the factors affecting this task positively or negatively.

Another study carried out by Mendonca and Johnson (1994: 748) tried to answer the following questions:

1. What types of negotiations do L2 students engage in during peer reviews?
2. How do L2 students use their peers' comments in their revision activities?
3. What are L2 students' perceptions of the usefulness of peer reviews?

The subjects in this study were 12 advanced ESL learners (based on their TOEFL scores); they were enrolled in a writing class designed for international graduate students at Pennsylvania State University. They came from different language backgrounds (students number given in brackets): Chinese (5), Spanish (4), French, Indonesian and Korean (1 for each), coming from different disciplines such education, political science and engineering.

The sources for data were three: transcription of peer review sessions, students' written essays and post-interviews with the students.

The results of this study are reported in three 'phases' as follows:

### **Phase One: Peer review Negotiations**

In Phase one, five kinds of negotiations took place in peer reviews: (1) question (whether for explanation or comprehension check), (2) explanation (of content, unclear point or opinion), (3) restatement, (4) suggestion and (5) grammar correction. Of highest frequencies were restatement and explanation and the lowest were grammar correction.

## **Phase Two: Students' revisions**

The analysis of students' first and second drafts indicated 40 cases of revisions showing 3 different patterns: (a) revised in peer review, (b) not revised in peer review and (c) revised not in peer review.

In the 'revised in peer review', students used their peers' comments in 53% of the cases of revision. Here is an example of how a student 'incorporated his/her peer's comments (quoted by the authors from students' work: 759):

### **First draft**

Parent involvement is the key for a successful education of language minorities children.

### **Second draft**

Particularly, for language minorities children whose native language is other than English parent involvement is a key factor for a successful education.

In the second draft, the comments suggested by the reviewer involved in addition to the ordering information for emphasis, giving enough information about the term 'language minorities' for the reader. This is usually known as 'reader based prose' in contrast to 'writer-based prose'.

In the 'not revised peer review', 10% of the cases of revisions, students did not accept their peers' suggestions. For instance, a reviewer suggested changing the expression 'as you can see in the above', but the writer insisted on using the same expression in his second draft.

In the 'revised not in the peer review', in 37% of the cases of revisions, students revised some parts of their compositions which had not been discussed or commented on by their peers. For example, one student changed the words 'however' and 'suggests' into 'nevertheless' and 'indicates' respectively without these words being discussed or suggestions made for change.

### **Phase 3: Post-interviews**

The aim of the postinterviews was to get the students' perceptions of the value of peer reviews in their redrafting essays. The 12 students reported that they found peer reviews useful 'because somebody can see some points you cannot see', as noted by one student.

Two students, however, reported that the peer review was not useful when working with a student whose field of study is not similar because in this case he cannot give comments on content.

In general, the findings of this study indicated that peer reviews helped students to adapt their texts to meet the needs and expectations of their audience. Further, these findings have implications that teachers should give their student opportunities to discuss and negotiate ideas and meanings with their peers, taking into account students' preferences to work with partners with similar or different interests.

#### **3.6.6 Feedback in the process of writing (Daoud 1995)**

Special emphasis is given to Daoud's (1995) research because it is relevant to the current study, namely the Syrian one. Moreover, emphasis is given to this research because it is comprehensive and detailed, covering a variety of aspects relative to feedback in the process of learning a language.

Daoud (1995) examined the role of feedback in students writing at the ESP Centre at Damascus University. Her methods of data collection consisted of: classroom observations, analysis of questionnaires filled in by teachers and students, interviews with teachers and students and analysis of samples of students' APP (Academic Project Paper) drafts.

The subjects were 200 postgraduate medical science students and ten teachers. Regarding the students, 100 were 'ex-students' (EX-SS) who had followed the ESP course at the Centre in the previous three years, and the other 100 were 'students on the course' (SSOC) when this research was carried out, that is April 1995.

Daoud (1995) reported her results in relation to seven issues relative to feedback, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Methods of Feedback: Different methods of feedback were reported in this study. The most dominant and effective was the teacher's written comments. Writing conferences and peer review, though believed by many teachers to be important, were infrequent and of marginal effectiveness.

2. Focus of Teachers' Feedback: The focus of teacher feedback was addressed from two different points of view. The first view is related the main features of any written work such as language, organization, content and layout. The majority of teachers reported, in the questionnaire and interview, that they emphasised all four aspects, though with variations of weight among them. But the students, 55% of EX-SS in contrast to 35 of SSOC, reported that their teachers focused more on organisation and layout than on language.

The second view is related to the personal focus of feedback: whether teachers focused on strengths or weaknesses. In this respect, nine teachers indicated starting with positive points; only one reported beginning with negative points. While the students, approximately 50%, indicated that their teachers 'always' and 'often' focused on their both positive and negative points. According to Daoud (1995: 46), *'it seems that teacher feedback focuses on student weaknesses more than strengths and on lower-level concerns more than higher ones, with little distinctions between early and late drafts'*, [the emphasis is hers].

3. Error Correction: Three types of errors were discussed by Daoud because of their relevance to the APP and students needs: language errors, organizational errors and citation errors.

(1) Language errors: Both teachers and students were asked to react to three ways of identifying language errors as follows: (a) the teacher underlines language errors and corrects them, (b) the teacher underlines language errors and asks the students to

correct them and (c) the teacher underlines language errors and gives students prompts to correct them. Teachers' responses, in this respect, were as follows: 3 ticked (a), none (b), 4 (c), while 3 indicated using a combination of (a), (b) and (c).

From the students' perspective, 75% of SSOC, in contrast to 38% of EX-SS mentioned that their teachers used (a) method. While 1% of the former, in contrast to 20% of the latter, mentioned that their teachers 'rarely' or 'never' corrected their mistakes.

Regarding students' preferences, the majority preferred teachers to correct their mistakes. Not so many of students liked correcting their mistakes by themselves. Overall, Daoud (1995: 48) suggests that '*novice teachers corrected more language errors and spent more time on each draft* [her emphasis] than did the experienced ones'.

We might ask the reason for this: Is it because experienced teachers have rationally decided that detailed correction is unnecessary or unhelpful or simply that new teachers are better because they are keen and idealistic?

## (2) Organizational errors

Both teachers and students, in the questionnaire and interview respectively, were asked to report on how organisational matters are corrected with respect to the following methods:

(a) Write 'organisation' in the margin, (b) Direct students in writing to correct errors, (c) Orally direct students to correct errors and (d) Other methods.

The analysis indicates that 7 teachers ticked method (b), 1 (c) and 2 followed method (d) (a combination of (b and c). These results conform with students' reports in the interview, Daoud mentions only, but she did not report on them.

### (3) Citation errors or plagiarism

Examining citation errors from the teachers' perspective, the majority were 'strict' in dealing with these errors, and they believed that they were serious errors. However, 2 teachers believed that citation errors should be seen as natural steps in the process of learning.

Looking at these errors from the students' view, the majority did not acknowledge the references properly. Some believed that it is natural to have citation errors since the project writing was not real. Others blamed their teachers for not teaching them how to refer to the sources properly.

### 4. Effectiveness of feedback practices

The analysis indicates that the majority of teachers and students believed that the teacher's written comments and the 'multi-draft policy' had influenced students' writing skills positively. Regarding 'peer review', it was seen differently. While teachers see it having a moderate role, the students, both groups, consider it as having a minor role.

### 5. Students' expectations and perceptions of their needs

Regarding the role of feedback in improving their writing skills, students had conflicting views. Some believed that feedback should focus on the conventions of academic writing, others thought that feedback should improve their grammar, vocabulary and spelling, and many needed encouraging feedback.

With respect to students' view of their teachers and their roles, students reported differently. For example, such points were mentioned:

'It is the teacher who can make students like or hate writing. Teacher J [sic] was wonderful as a writing teacher'.

'The way we are taught writing confuses us. We are now more fearful of making mistakes than ever before'.

In general, the teachers' role was more appreciated by the female students.

## 6. Teachers' expectations

Regarding teachers' view of learners, the teachers agreed that medical students have genuine desire to learn academic writing in English. Some problems were reported, however. For example, teachers highlighted students' 'reluctance' to do homework because they were very busy, though some of them follow a general language course privately while the university course is offered to them free of charge. It seems that the teachers were not convinced by students' 'pretext' of lacking time to do their assignments.

Daoud's research concludes with some recommendations relative to the feedback.

In concluding this section, I might say that the majority of the studies surveyed here point out that feedback on writing plays a decisive role in the process of learning, but also demonstrates how students have individual preferences. It is difficult to form clear generalizable conclusions about types of feedback. Most researchers, however, agree that the role of feedback can be positively maximized if both teachers and learners are actively involved in a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere.

### 3.7 Students' attitudes to and perceptions of writing

There is not much research relative to students' attitudes toward writing , particularly in an ESL context. The review here, therefore, is limited to the discussion by Krashen (1984), and the work of Blanton (1987), Thomas (1993), Pennington and Zhang (1993).

Krashen (1984: 29) makes a distinction between two types of writers who have writing problems. These are the *remedial* and the *blocked* writer. The former is defined by Krashen as 'one who has neither acquired the code nor has he developed an efficient writing process'. The latter is defined as ' one who has acquired the code but who has problems in performance'. Moreover, both remedial and blocked writers may have some false beliefs or 'superstitions' about writing which hinder their writing performance. For example, Krashen (1984: 32) reports three cases discussed by Rose (1980: 394). One student reported that every composition should have three ideas. This belief led that student to include in his/her writing ideas which were not relevant to the topic. Another student mentioned that the outline should include every possible detail although this made it difficult for the student to convert these details into a short essay. A third student reported that good essays should have excellent introductions which attract the reader's attention from the start. This belief gave the student an impression that if he/she could not produce excellent introductions, he/she would not be able to proceed with the writing. In these cases students' attitudes or beliefs had unfortunate effect on their actual work.

Krashen (1984: 33) , however, considers the false belief that 'there is no writing process' to be the most dangerous one. A possible explanation for this wrong belief , Krashen suggests, is that students see only the products of writing (in books or articles, for example)and never see the processes of planning and revisions which led to these products. This belief is confirmed and supported, Krashen adds, when writing teachers in most learning contexts require students to complete their essays in class within a short time limit. This behaviour might lead students to think that planning and redrafting are not essential or even are relevant to the writing process. Krashen suggests that showing students examples of how skilful writers compose might give



them options and dispel false impressions about writing. Then he offers three pieces of advice. First, before one starts writing, one should have a rough plan or outline that might be changed depending on the development of ideas. Secondly, one should pay more attention to content than to mechanics and leave proof-reading until the final stages of writing. Finally, it is useful to have occasional pauses or moments of reflection during the writing process in order to make sure that one is still on the right track.

In an investigation of ESL students' perceptions of writing, Blanton (1987) tried to 'reshape' students' perceptions. According to Blanton, her students were 'scared to death to write in English' (p 112). Most of them were following intensive writing courses ( 15 hours per week, plus 5 laboratory hours), and were always under pressure and anxiety to pass their writing examinations. This feeling of both panic and anxiety affected their writing negatively, Blanton suggests, and in the long run inhibited them from becoming skilful writers. Since Blanton's findings are very different from the finding of the present study, this is discussed further in Chapter 8.

Blanton primarily felt that she should increase students' confidence in writing in English. She suggested that this could be done through making them aware of their progress in writing and by telling them that writing is a complex process that needs time to master. To achieve such aims, Blanton introduces a 'multi-step writing programme' which consisted of three stages where the teacher played a different role in each stage. Further, Blanton mentions that this programme was successful and helpful for her in reshaping students' perceptions of writing. The stages of writing programme were:

(1) Journal writing: This technique of writing journals was just used for five minutes of the first class in the morning dialy in a relaxed atmosphere. All the class, including the teacher, were involved in this writing activity. Students were told from the start that neither title and topic sentence nor correction were required in this writing; just a date to mark the entry. They could write on whatever they wanted.

(2) Using learning logs: Unlike journals, learning logs are written on a topic relevant to the ESL class. Each student writes approximately one page at home once a week to be read by the teacher. By using this technique students were having the experience of writing for a specific reader, namely the teacher, whose role in responding to students' writing was limited to only the content, sharing a similar experience, and highlighting good points.

(3) Essay writing: Students were asked to write an essay every week on one topic discussed in class in terms of the writer's experience and the rhetorical choices he made in writing this topic. When they finished their first draft which was discussed in class in pairs, they were told to re-write their essays and hand them to their teacher the next day. The teacher read these essays as an editor and made written comments in the margins on these essays suggesting ways for improvement. This was intended to raise students' awareness of the value of editing and revising, essential aspects of writing, and let them think of themselves as 'practitioners of a craft'.

Thus the series of writing journals, learning logs and essays has been found very helpful in reshaping students' views of writing by enhancing students' experience of writing and reducing their apprehension.

But Blanton in her report reviewed above did not explain her methodology for finding out the students' attitudes toward writing in English. Her argument was that 'neither attitude tests nor statistical measurement of their anxiety about writing are needed to tell the tale; their anxiety and the pressure they feel to write well are palpable in the classroom' (p112). Thus she became aware of students' attitudes toward writing in English either by observing their behaviour in classroom or by reading their written work.

In a recent study by Thomas (1993), which investigated students' attitudes toward their writing ability, the subjects were overseas students who were registered in the intermediate level of an intensive English course at the American language Institute at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1991. Thomas collected some students' views

and feelings about writing, which she got from both direct questioning and from their written journals. Some examples quoted from students' writing by Thomas 1993: 12-15 are given below:

'Writing in English is difficult ... too difficult', noted by Vicki, a student from Taiwan.

'I feel like I am another person when I write in English. I don't feel well', reported by Cristina.

'English is very difficult and tough for me, so I always have a lot of problems when I write In English ... I sometimes feel like, 'My essay is not good, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid: that means I cannot translate well', noted by Hiromi.

Thomas considers the 'syndrome' of 'I can't write English' as a very serious problem for the ESL writing class because it will inhibit the students from any active participation in writing activities. Moreover, she suggests that it is the teachers' task to help students who have such apprehensions about writing overcome such problems.

Thomas then recommends following a series of classroom policies which could have positive effects on students' negative attitudes toward writing in English. These are as follows:

- Building a Comfortable Atmosphere in the Classroom

Establishing a more relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom is useful and has 'far-reaching effects' on writing activities. In such an atmosphere, a Taiwanese student reported in his journal that 'Under no pressure is the best way to write a good composition. I appreciate that you [the teacher] have given me a comfortable atmosphere in the English writing class' (p.13).

- Examining Assumptions about writing

Thomas believes that the students' negative attitudes about their writing abilities were caused by their false beliefs about writing. An example of a 'false belief' is given as 'writing means creating grammatically perfect sentences', as noted by a Spanish student. This view of writing can be eradicated by reassuring students that what counts in good writing is ideas, rather than grammar; and by showing 'genuine interest' with respect to what they write. Further, this assurance that ideas are essential in writing quality will motivate students to take risks and express their ideas in detail, she argues. By the end of the course, the same Spanish student reported that 'I have trust in myself and I think that I can write without nervous [sic]. ... I can show my ideas on paper' (p.13).

- **Demystifying the Writing Process**

A Japanese student had the view that writing is very difficult and she appeared to think that the ability of writing is 'innate rather than acquired' (sic). Thomas suggested telling the students that though the writing process is so complex, it can be learned. She also suggested that by showing them the teacher's own experience of writing (success and failure) students could realise that making mistakes is a part of that process.

- **Exploring Personal Experience**

Another Japanese student felt that she could not write in English because both her English and ideas were poor. This might have been due to the fact that, Thomas argues, no one had taught her that daily life experiences are worth writing about. In this respect, Thomas suggests the helpful practice of encouraging the students to write an essay on an exciting experience of their own.

- **The Power of a Positive Perspective**

Thomas thinks that the main reason for changing students' negative attitudes toward writing is the resulting view of themselves as writers, which, in the case of her students, motivated them to get involved actively and seriously in the writing process. The study concludes with many implications about how students' attitudes toward writing in English can be positively activated. For example, Thomas suggests that

‘First, we as ESL writing teachers need to be researchers who observe, listen, and learn from our students. We need to listen to all the different ways they speak to us: through words, through gestures, and sometimes through silence. We need to pay attention to students’ reactions to tasks and assignments, by considering students’ own intentions and purposes for writing’ (p. 15).

Another study by Pennington and Zhang investigated students’ perceptions of writing and the activities involved in writing at tertiary level. The research involved thirty-seven Chinese subjects who were graduate students from various disciplines at the University of Hawaii at Manoa; the majority had been in America for at least two years.

A questionnaire of 13 questions was given to these subjects to examine their attitudes toward writing.

Concerning their general attitudes to writing in English, the majority (84%) gave positive responses, while 16% gave negative answers. This indicates that they are generally relatively confident about their writing in English. Similar findings are found in the thesis of the current research where students emphasised the importance of writing in determining the students’ future success or failure.

In answer to a question about the number of revisions, 24 students reported that they revised between 1 and 3 times, 5 students mentioned between 4 and 5, while 8 did not respond to this question. This suggests that the majority of students were aware of the value of revising and redrafting.

In answer to a question concerning the aspect of writing they believed needed most attention and improvement, vocabulary was on the top of their list, and punctuation was the last one in the list. This is not surprising since the majority of, if not all, overseas students have difficulty in finding the appropriate word to convey the intended meaning.

Similar results are reported in this research (See 8.1 and 8.2), where students mentioned that ‘Arabisms’ or literary translation occur when using Arabic while writing in English’.

In concluding this section, I might say that the area of students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward writing needs further future research. This is important, I think, because by providing writing instructors with solid information about this issue would put them in a better position to deal more positively with students’ attitudes to writing by helping students to overcome their anxiety and panic when they write in English, which in the long run will help students to have positive perceptions of writing and become better writers when writing in English.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a selective survey of some writing research which seemed to be of some relevance to the current thesis. Section 3.2 dealt with different ways of measuring writing development, which involved both countable measures and holistic evaluation. Section 3.3 is devoted to the impact that L1 might have on L2 writing. Section 3.4 discussed some problems that ESL learners encounter when they write in English. These included problems both at the syntactic and discoursal levels. The reading-writing relationship was discussed in 3.5. Section 3.6 discussed the role of feedback in fostering students’ writing. Some students’ attitudes to writing in English were dealt with in 3.7.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Some Syntactic Analyses**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This current research is interested in tracing the development of students' writing ability at university level. This chapter consists of two major sections. Section one is about measuring the grammatical complexity of students' writing using the conventional index of the sentence (based formally on the initial capital letter and final full stop). Section two is devoted to measuring the grammatical complexity of students' writing using the T-unit index, suggested by Hunt 1965.

As mentioned in the Data Collection and Methodology Chapter the subjects of this study are thirty specialist students at the Department of English of Aleppo University in Syria. The students' educational background is fairly homogenous: students in Syria are admitted to university after six years' exposure to learning English as a second language (6 hours per week) in schools, where Arabic is the medium of instruction for all other subjects. With respect to writing, before entering universities, the students have not practised writing in the sense of creating a text. They mainly wrote vocabulary and grammar exercises, such as putting words in meaningful sentences, filling spaces and practising tense formation. In the Department of English at university the situation is completely different. English is the language of instruction and special emphasis is devoted to writing, by which students' success or failure is judged in the final examination.

#### **4.2.1 Related Research: Grammatical Complexity and Maturity**

As explained in 3.2, a major piece of research was carried out in America by Hunt (1965) to measure the development of young children's writing at different levels (Grades 4,6 and 12). By using the T-unit (defined by Hunt 1965: 49 as one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached to or embedded within it), Hunt reported that younger children tend to write short T-units whereas older children tend to write longer T-units. In other words, as the children grow older, their writing becomes more complex in syntactic terms. Hunt's findings are supported by many research studies such as Mellon (1969) and O'Hare (1973).

Following Hunt's findings, the current researcher hypothesises that as non-native speaker students study longer, they should be able to write more complex sentences. To put it differently, we would expect that fourth year students would write more complex sentences than when they were in their first year. Similarly, there should be a development in the range of vocabulary fourth year students use, as well, and in fact, that general language development should be reflected in the written texts produced by the students.

#### **4.2.2 Procedure**

To confirm or refute this hypothesis, sixty exam scripts of students' writing produced by the same subjects but at different stages of their university learning (30 first year and 30 fourth year 1989-1992) were typed onto disk. Since the scripts were hand written, they could not be electronically scanned, but the typed version accurately reproduced the texts written by the students with all errors and slips retained. Once they were in computer readable form, the texts were analysed in various ways, beginning with standard length as indicated by the use of full stop and capital letters.

#### **4.2.3 Results of sentence length analysis**

With respect to average sentence length in words number (wps), the following results are shown in Table 4.1 below:



**Table 4.1 Average sentence length in words in students' essays**

Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/decrease
1	10.6	19.2	+6.6
2	55.3	121.5	+66.2
3	26.1	29.6	+3.5
4	26.7	16.3	-10.4
5	16.3	26.6	+10.3
6	78.5	14	-64.5
7	20.2	19.3	-0.9
8	71.7	128.5	+56.8
9	16.9	16.5	-0.4
10	20.3	19.3	-1
11	16.4	16.4	=
12	13.3	10.9	-2.4
13	24.2	22.5	-1.8
14	14.8	18.8	+4
15	24	14.8	-9.2
16	20.3	24.9	+4.6
17	21.5	14.1	-7.4
18	34.8	16.6	-18.2
19	46	19.3	-26.7
20	122.7	31.8	-90.9
21	36.2	13.3	-23.3
22	35.2	18.2	-17
23	22.9	30.1	+7.2
24	17	23.5	+6.5
25	25.3	24.7	-0.6
26	21.1	17.7	-3.4
27	26.1	22.1	-4
28	24.4	20.1	-4.3
29	19.8	16.6	-3.4
30	18.9	16.6	-2.3
Mean	30.9	26.7	-4.2
Standard Deviation	23.60	27.10	4.50

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 0.82; df: 29

P-value= 0.419, which is not significant at 0.05 level.

As the results show in the table above, we notice that the lowest sentence length in the first year is 10.6, the highest is 122.7 whereas the lowest sentence length in the fourth year is 10.9, the highest is 128.5, indicating a considerable range. The total

mean of sentence length in the first year is 30.9, whereas in the fourth year it is 26.7. This shows an average decrease in sentence length of 4.2 wps.

Two further points can be noticed. One is that the range of increase varied from +2.5 to +101.7, whereas the range of decrease varied from -04 to -90.9. The second is that 9 students out of 30 increased their sentence length, while 20 out of 30 decreased their sentence length and only 1 out of 30 kept his sentence length the same.

#### **4.2.3 Discussion of results**

As the results seemingly indicate, as shown in the table 1 above, the hypothesis of this research is not confirmed in particular on the average scores as a whole. Moreover, there are some surprising results since some students are producing unusually long sentences as measured by capitalisation and full stop.

But a thorough and careful analysis of the data shows a completely different picture. If we examine carefully some cases where the apparent analyses demonstrate no improvement in the grammatical complexity of fourth year papers, rather a decrease, which is surprising, we can see the reasons behind such misleading results.

For instance, script number 6 of the first year indicates that the sentence length in the first year is 78.5 wps and the actual text shows that the whole essay is written in only 2 sentences, one of 35 words in length, the other of 122. This suggests that the student has not mastered the structure of English sentences. In fact, there is little wrong in the structure of sentences (in spite of many minor errors), except that commas are used where full stops are needed. This can be shown in the following example (brackets with the suggested punctuation marks are inserted by the current researcher to indicate possible modification):

Once I watched a very interesting film which holds the title: the barriers (.) its story go around a man wants to travel from the east destrict to the south destrict but he doesn't have a passport (.) so he tries many times to get in to the south without a passport(.), in one review he assumes the role of a sheep

by putting a wool over himself and hides himself in the middle of the sheep horn but unfortunately the shepherd discovered him,(.) so he failed,(.) I found this film very interesting because it displays a real matter and discusses the problem of the barriers which separate two Arab countries from one nation and put many obstructions in front of the traveller.

Note: the modifications made here are limited to the use of punctuation marks.

A better and correct use of the full stop regarding the above example, I suggest, would reduce the average sentence length from 78.5 wps to 19.6 wps.

Furthermore, the student here, one may suggest, is either not aware of how the full stop is used in English, thinking that it can only be used at the end of the paragraph or he is influenced by the native language (Arabic), where meaning does not rely on punctuation marks in writing. In Arabic, one can read and understand a whole essay with the complete absence of punctuation marks and this is accepted educated style. In the fourth year, the same student script number 6, shows a better use of punctuation marks, except for two wrong uses of full stops where no punctuation mark is required; for instance:

He has no prophecy, no flattery, and no untruthfulness(). Provided that he is aware that love is not ruled by reason.

After this modification, the sentence length in this script increases to 18.1 wps from of 14 wps.

To take another example, in the script No. 10, from first year, the apparent sentence length is 20.3. But the actual story is not so clear. Let us consider the following example from the first year:

I laughed at his appearance(.), his shirt was short and very dirty, so the people were laughing at him(.), and because he did not think, he laughed with them(.) why he did not know.

We notice one instance of using a comma, where a full stop is needed, and one instance with no use of any punctuation marks, where a full stop is needed. Taking into account the modifications suggested above, the sentence length will drop to 15.2 wps instead of 20.3 wps.

Similarly, for script No. 19 first year, the text consists of only three sentences and three paragraphs; their lengths being 44 wps, 116 wps and 24 wps respectively. This student seems to have the same problem as No. 6, who thinks that full stops are just needed at the end of a paragraph. He used 7 instances of commas where full stops are needed. If this modification is added, his sentence length is reduced to 16.3 wps instead of 36.2 wps. Script No 19 fourth year shows a good command of English sentence structure with an average of 19.3 wps.

Likewise script No. 21 first year reveals 15 cases of wrong uses of comma, which caused the seemingly excessive sentence length of 36.2 wps. When full stops are used instead of commas at natural English sentence ends, the sentence length dramatically drops to 15.2 wps. In the fourth year paper of the same student, we find an average sentence length of 19.3 wps. Here, the reason behind short sentence length, it seems to me, is that the writer quotes short sentences, with lengths of 9 wps, 6 wps and 7 wps respectively, such as:

· What is needed in society is an accommodating virtue. We must be wise in moderation. True reason lies in shunning all extremes.

Similarly, in script 22, the text is written in one paragraph with five sentences, but the fourth sentence compromises nearly two thirds of the text (90 words). This sentence would become six sentences if the correct use of full stops were applied.

Taking into account the above suggestions regarding the correct use of commas, we get an adjusted table as follows:

**Table 4.2: Adjusted sentence length in words for students' scripts**

Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/Decrease
1	16	19.2	+3.2
2	18.6	24.2	+5.6
3	21.2	29.6	+8.4
4	18.7	17.1	-1.6
5	16.3	26.6	+10.3
6	19.6	18.1	-1.5
7	20.2	19.3	-0.9
8	17.7	25.7	+8
9	16.9	17.7	+0.8
10	15.2	19.3	+4.1
11	16.4	16.4	=
12	13.3	16.1	+2.8
13	11.1	22.5	+11.4
14	14.8	18.8	+4
15	22.5	16.3	-6.2
16	16	24.9	+8.9
17	12.2	14.4	+2.2
18	18.5	16.6	-1.9
19	16.3	19.3	+3
20	16.7	26.9	+10.2
21	16.7	13.3	-3.4
22	13.5	18.2	+4.7
23	15.7	30.1	+14.4
24	17	23.5	+6.5
25	25.3	24.7	-0.6
26	21.2	17.7	-3.5
27	13.8	22.1	+8.3
28	20.8	20.1	-0.7
29	19.8	16.4	-3.4
30	18.9	16.6	-2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>482.07</b>	<b>605.7</b>	<b>+124.64</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>17.036</b>	<b>20.39</b>	<b>+3.03</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>4.48</b>	<b>1.33</b>

Type test used: t-test

T-value: 3.15; df: 29

P-value= 0.004, which is significant at 0.01 level.

The results in the adjusted table demonstrate a better indication of the development of sentence length: 11 students out of 30 in fourth year showed a decrease in their sentence length ( in the former table they were 20) when compared with their counterparts in first year; 18 students 30 in fourth year, which is a reasonable percentage, increased their sentence length when compared with their counterparts in first year (in the former table they were 9) and 1 student out 30 kept his sentence length the same as in first year.

In concluding this section, I might say that when dealing with the syntactic complexity of written texts in a second language context where Arabic is the first language, it might be misleading to consider just the length of sentences without investigating the use of commas or full stops used by the writers. This is due to the fact that second language learners might not use punctuation marks correctly because they are influenced by their mother tongue, which has different ways of marking the boundaries of sentences. Therefore I suggest a thorough analysis based on the syntax, which gives a better indication of the development of grammatical complexity. Thus the reasons behind such seeming differences in sentence length between the first year and fourth year scripts, in this study, are that, it seems to me, first year students used commas incorrectly instead of full stops. Fourth year students, on the other hand, used in many cases quoted material originally having short sentences, which in the long run reduced their sentence length. Therefore I suggest using T-units index, invented by Hunt (1965), which gives a better indication of the development of grammatical complexity, and this is dealt with in the coming section.

#### **4.3 Further syntactic analysis**

Hunt's research (1965) into the different characteristics of the syntax of students at different levels demonstrated that T-units have proved to be a better and more reliable indicator of young learners' writing development, when compared with other indexes such as sentence length (when measured on the basis of punctuation) and clause length.

To explain the system of analysis, Hunt quotes an example of fourth grade writing, punctuated as one sentence, 68 words long. This sentence, Hunt adds, is four times as long as the average length of twelfth grade sentences, but the length is not, in itself, a reflection of writing. In fact, it is evidence that the student has not mastered the punctuation of sentences, but this alone does not reveal the students' command of sentence structure and clause structure. The example sentence is quoted below:

I like the movie we saw about Moby Dick the white whale the captain said if you can kill the white whale Moby Dick I will give this gold to the one that can do it and it is worth sixteen dollars they tried and tried but they were trying they killed a whale and used the oil for the lamps they almost caught the white whale. (Hunt 1965:20)

To consider the structure more carefully, the above sentence can be segmented into six "T-units", each having a capital letter and a period to indicate the beginning and end respectively. A slant line shows the start of each new clause. This can be shown below:

1. I like the movie/ we saw about Moby Dick, the white whale.
2. The captain said/ if you can kill the white whale, Moby Dick,/ I will give this gold to the one/ that can do it.
3. And it is worth sixteen dollars.
4. They tried and tried.
5. But/ while they were trying/ they killed a whale and used oil for the lamps.
6. They almost caught the white whale.

The above segmentation shows that some units contain only a single clause (as in 3, 4 and 6); whereas other units are multi-clause units as in (1,2 and 5). In defining the T-unit, as the minimal terminable unit, Hunt (1965: 49) says it is "one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached to or embedded within it." It is important to note that, apart from the segmentation, the analytic method does not change the grammatical structure of the individual segments, which are retained precisely as written by the students.

#### 4.3.1 T-units segmentation of students' writing

Thus applying Hunt's T-units segmentation to a sample of the subjects of the current study, chosen randomly, we should get a better indication of their writing development over the period of their study. This trial sample proved successful and the analysis was applied to all the texts. Here, I present the detailed analysis of three pairs of sample texts, in order to display the methods in detail. This is followed by full statistical tables for the 60 texts.

The students' writing is listed below as it was written, except that the spelling is corrected. Then each text is segmented into its units.

At the sunset, when I was walking through the road I heard tumult sounds and voices. A great procession of people came. What a pity! A young man not twenty was under the wheels. It was a sad scene. I run and people. All people astonished. what had they to do?

One of them hurried to telephone and another stood beside the young man looking at his face and a latent love shining up his eyes. While the driver of the car stood capping his mouth without any movement. As time went one [sic] I became more and more worried. However, the ambulance car came, of course you can imagine our relief when we saw him good and sound though he was wounded in head.

Hence wide smiles were up the faces of people. After that, I returned home again after that scene. wishing a speedy recovery for him. World seemed to me like a coffin, but I had tears to cure my anguish. (Ex11)

1. At the sunset, when I was walking through the road/ I heard tumult sounds and voices.
2. A great procession of people came.
3. What a pity!
4. A young man not twenty was under the wheels.
5. It was a sad scene.
6. I run and people.
7. All people [were] astonished.
8. what had they to do?
9. One of them hurried to telephone.
10. And another stood beside the young man looking at his face.
11. And a latent love [is] shining up his eyes.



12. While the driver of the car stood capping his mouth without any movement.
13. As time went on[e]/ I became more and more worried.
14. However, the ambulance car came.
15. Of course you can imagine our relief/ when we saw him good and sound/ though he was wounded in head.
16. Hence wide smiles were up the faces of people.
17. After that, I returned home again after that scene.[,]/ wishing a speedy recovery for him.
18. World seemed to me like a coffin.
19. But I had tears to cure my anguish.

Following Hunt's use of T-units, the above text has been segmented into 19 units.

The words per T-unit is an average of 8.84 in comparison with words per sentence of 10.6 wps, where a 'sentence' is formally marked by an initial capital letter and a final full-stop.

Moreover, the mean clauses per T-unit (cpt) for the above text is 1.31 cpt

The corresponding script to the above text, written by the same student in year 4, is Ex41:

It is beyond question that the gallant Odysseus has occupied the first heroic rank among all other characters, this is more or less connected with his heroic achievements. It is Odysseus, who could ravage Troy and bring it into debris. The arch-deceiver Odysseus could always find a way to wriggle out of any crucial situation. Odysseus' witticism and resourcefulness permeate the whole body of the epic in question. He could invent "The wooden Horse", through which all the Trojan's fortifications seem to be defenceless, vulnerable and faint. In fact, the stunt-hearted Odysseus could penetrate the Trojan's lines in an indomitable matchless way. If we make a random comparison between him and other characters in the Odyssey, we will see how Odysseus is upheld to be a semi-god, while others seem in their recklessness and inconsistency as dwarfs. Here, we can not help excepting the brave Agamemnon. However, if we make a tour through the Odyssey, we notice that Odysseus' heroism is reechoed and manifested throughout the whole book. The bold tenacious Odysseus could stand against the Cyclops, that formidable monster. He with the help of his men managed a painted olive pole in order to pierce the Cyclops' eye.. In this way, they could slip through and escape from the formidable hands of the Cyclops.

Despite the fact that the Nymph Calypso grants him immortality and ageless youth, but nevertheless, he refuses her offer and insists on returning to his motherland. Let us put it in the words of Athene:

Day after day she [ Calypso] does her best to abandon Ethic from his memory with false and flattering words; and Odysseus who, would give anything for the mere sight of the smoke rising up from his own land, can only yearn for death.

Although she tempts him with all her might, giving him immortality and ageless youth, but nevertheless, he longs to go back to his home, his wife and his son. He wants to see the happy day of his return. The love of the homeland is a natural instinctive desire within all human beings. It is also unquestionably a moral value.

Moreover, Alcineus, the king of Scherie, offers him his daughter Nausicaa as a wife. "I could wish for nothing better than for you to have my daughter and to take place here as my son-in-law, in a place I should provide and furnish for you." At any rate, Odysseus tactfully refuses, demanding that he wants to go back to his country and wife. This, of course, shows us clearly Odysseus' utter faithfulness to his own wife and to the institution of marriage as well.(Ex41)

Applying the same procedure of segmentation into T-units, the fourth year script is analysed as follows:

1. It is beyond question/ that the gallant Odysseus has occupied the first heroic rank among all other characters.
2. This is more or less connected with his heroic achievements.
3. It is Odysseus/ who could ravage Troy/ and bring it into debris.
4. The arch-deceiver Odysseus could always find a way/ to wriggle out of any crucial situation.
5. Odysseus' witticism and resourcefulness permeate the whole body of the epic in question.
6. He could invent "The wooden Horse",/ through which all the Trojan's fortifications seem/ to be defenceless, vulnerable and faint.
7. In fact, the stunt-hearted Odysseus could penetrate the Trojan's lines in an indomitable matchless way.
8. If we make a random comparison between him and other characters in the Odyssey, / we will see/ how Odysseus is upheld to be a semi-god.
9. While others seem in their recklessness and inconsistency as dwarfs.
10. Here, we cannot help excepting the brave Agamemnon.

11. However, if we make a tour through the Odyssey,/ we notice/ that Odysseus' heroism is re-echoed and manifested throughout the whole book.
12. The bold tenacious Odysseus could stand against the Cyclops, that formidable monster.
13. He with the help of his men managed a pointed olive pole in order to pierce the Cyclops 'eye.
14. In this way, they could slip through and escape from the formidable hands of the Cyclops.
15. Despite the fact that the Nymph Calypso grants him immortality and ageless youth, / but nevertheless, he refuses her offer and insists on returning to his motherland.
16. Let us put it in the words of Athene:
17. "Day after day she [ Calypso] does her best/ to abandon Ethaca from his memory with false and flattering words;
18. And Odysseus/ who, would give anything for the mere sight of the smoke/ rising up from his own land,/ can only yearn for death."
19. Although she tempts him with all her might,/ giving him immortality and ageless youth,/ but nevertheless, he longs/ to go back to his home, his wife and his son.
20. He wants to see the happy day of his return.
21. The love of the homeland is a natural instinctive desire within all human beings.
22. It is also unquestionably a moral value.
23. Moreover, Alcineus, the king of Scherie, offers him his daughter Nausicaa as a wife.
24. "I could wish for nothing better than for you/ to have my daughter/ and to take place here as my son-in-law, in a place/ I should provide and furnish for you."
25. At any rate, Odysseus tactfully refuses,/ demanding /that he wants/ to go back to his country and wife.
26. This, of course, shows us clearly Odysseus' utter faithfulness to his own wife and to the institution of marriage as well.

After analysis, the mean length of T-units is 17 wpt, which indicates an average increase of 8.16 words per T-unit.

The mean clauses per T-unit for the above text is 1.85. This shows an average increase of 0.54 cpt.

To take another example, Ex110, from year 1

God creates people and gives them mind to think, to become able to live in the world and to know the right from the wrong. So the mind is a human characteristic.

Last two days, I was going to my school. In the street I saw an absent minded person. He was faltering and loitering from place to another and some boys were laughing at him, because he said empty words without meaning and moral. He took the looking of the people including I. I laughed at his appearance, his shirt was short and very dirty, so the people were laughing at him, and because he did not think, he laughed with them why he did not know. After that I went to my school to tell my friends about this man who did not distinguish the good fro the bad.

Finally, we see that the mind is very important thing for man, and without it we live wasting our time aimlessly, and we must strengthen our minds by knowledge. (Ex110)

1. God creates people and gives them mind to think,/ to become able to live in the world/ and to know the right from the wrong.
2. So the mind is a human characteristic.
3. Last two days, I was going to my school.
4. In the street I saw an absent minded person.
5. He was faltering/ and loitering from place to another.
6. And some boys were laughing at him,/ because he said empty words without meaning and moral.
7. He took the looking of the people including I.
8. I laughed at his appearance.
9. His shirt was short and very dirty,/ so the people were laughing at him.
10. And because he did not think,/ he laughed with them.
11. why he did not know.
12. After that I went to my school to tell my friends about this man/ who did not distinguish the good fro the bad.
13. Finally, we see that the mind is very important thing for man.
14. And without it we live wasting our time aimlessly.

15. And we must strengthen our minds by knowledge.

The mean T-units length for the above script is 12.2 wpt.

The mean clauses per T-unit for the above text is 1.46 cpt.

The corresponding script from the same student in year 4 is Ex410, quoted below:

Odysseus is a great man who is looked at as semi-god because of his wisdom and intelligence. He has got the wisdom to solve his problems in tricky ways. Odysseus had many heroic achievements, one of them was his plan to go out of the cave in which they were imprisoned by the Cyclops. His plan was to have a pointed pole to be directed to the Cyclops's eye. When the Cyclops had this kind of blinding, he would rush to the entrance and push the rock aside, and would put his hands over the wall in order to discover their escape by touching. Odysseus's plan was to go out with the cattle fixing themselves to the chest of the middle of the sheep so that the Cyclops would touch those in each side and leave the one in the middle. The crew went out one by one and saved because of Odysseus's heroic deed.

Another heroic achievement of Odysseus was his visit to Hades, the god of the dead. There, in the world of the dead, he met the souls of some persons whom he had known especially Agamemnon, his mother, Oedipus' mother and Teirsias who was the most important one. Teirsias told him a kind of prophecy that he (Odysseus) would go back to his country and face many troubles in his way and he would fight the suitors. But the most important thing he said to Odysseus that he (Odysseus) should continue his travels in order to get and more knowledge. This of course was something heroic because it had not been done by a human being before.

Concerning Odysseus's moral integrity, this was shown on several occasions. His moral integrity was clear when he approached a number of girls in the Phaeacian land. He was naked, therefore he put some leaves on his manhood and came to ask for help. This showed his modesty, tactfulness, and morality. He also refuses to let them (the girls) wash him saying: "leave me to wash the brine myself."

Odysseus's faithfulness to his wife and country can be considered as something moral on his part. Although he was offered immortality, richness and kingdom, yet he preferred to go back to his country and his wife. He said to Calypso "I too know well enough that my wise Penelope's looks and stature are insignificant compared to yours. Nevertheless I long to reach my home and see the happy day of my return." So faithfulness is a moral value. Homer through Odysseus wants to teach us a moral lesson that if one is offered a paradise, home is preferable. (Ex410)

The T-units of the above script are as follows:

1. Odysseus is a great man/ who is looked at as semi-god/ because of his wisdom and intelligence.
2. He has got the wisdom/ to solve his problems in tricky ways.
3. Odysseus had many heroic achievements,/ one of them was his plan/ to go out of the cave/ in which they were imprisoned by the Cyclops.
4. His plan was to have a pointed pole/ to be directed to the Cyclops's eye.
5. When the Cyclops had this kind of blinding,/ he would rush to the entrance/ and push the rock aside,/ and would put his hands over the wall/ in order to discover their escape by touching.
6. Odysseus's plan was/ to go out with the cattle/ fixing themselves to the chest of the middle of the sheep/ so that the Cyclops would touch those in each side/ and leave the one in the middle.
7. The crew went out one by one/ and saved because of Odysseus's heroic deed.
8. Another heroic achievement of Odysseus was his visit to Hades, the god of the dead.
9. There, in the world of the dead, he met the souls of some persons/ whom he had known especially Agamemnon, his mother, Oedipus' mother and Teirsias/ who was the most important one.
10. Teirsias told him a kind of prophecy/ that he (Odysseus) would go back to his country/ and face many troubles in his way.
11. And he would fight the suitors.
12. But the most important thing he said to Odysseus/ that he (Odysseus) should continue his travels/ in order to get more and more knowledge.
13. This of course was something heroic/ because it had not been done by a human being before.
14. Concerning Odysseus's moral integrity, this was shown on several occasions.
15. His moral integrity was clear/ when he approached a number of girls in the Phaeacian land.
16. He was naked,/ therefore he put some leaves on his manhood/ and came to ask for help.
17. This showed his modesty, tactfulness, and morality.

18. He also refuses to let them (the girls) wash him saying/: "leave me to wash the brine myself."
19. Odysseus's faithfulness to his wife and country can be considered as something moral on his part.
20. Although he was offered immortality, richness and kingdom,/ yet he preferred/ to go back to his country and his wife.
21. He said to Calypso/ "I too know well enough/ that my wise Penelope's looks and stature are insignificant/ compared to yours.
22. Nevertheless I long to reach my home/ and see the happy day of my return."
23. So faithfulness is a moral value.
24. Homer through Odysseus wants to teach us a moral lesson/ that if one is offered a paradise,/ home is preferable.

The mean length of T-units is 18.5 wpt as compared with the same student work in year 1 of 12.2 wpt. This shows an increase of 6.3 wpt.

Moreover, the mean clauses per T-unit for the above text is 2.45 cpt. This indicates an average increase of 0.99 cpt, which indicates a reasonable development.

A further example is Ex120 from year 1

Last week I saw a very attractive film, it was about a girl called, Suzan; she was a beautiful girl; full of activity; always smiling; happy girl; she was 19 years old, and she liked sport very much, and she was a member in a basketball team; she was one of the best players; once when they were playing a match with other team by accident she felt down, and her leg was broken, and also the nervous central system was injured, so all the doctors told her that she would be unable to walk again, but Suzan never felt sad or sorrow for what had happened to her, and she believe in God was so strong, and she decided to walk, so she was waking up every day early, and she was training her self on walking at least she became able to walk, and that good and excellent result astonished all the people around her, and she returned to her life which she missed to much, again happy and hopeful.

So I liked this film because it gave us a good picture about how the person can make own life and his own happiness by him self, so when we decide to do something, and we work for this aim we will certainly reach it because nothing impossible if we used the qualities that God had given to us, and the film told us that our belief in God should not lessen if we faced any problem but we must be sure that God will help us to overcome this trouble, so Suzan's belief in God was strong so that helped her to hopeful and made her

decision to walk again, and she succeeded, also it showed us that everything depends on our well because the strong well of the person is very important to be able to solve the problems of life, and thinking in future and aiming for better life is another basic that makes us live and work because life doesn't stop if we stop working but life will continue going on with us or without us, and as they said " man's well makes miracles".

The T-unit analysis for Text EX120 is as follows:

1. Last week I saw a very attractive film.
2. It was about a girl called, Suzan;
3. she was a beautiful girl; full of activity; always smiling; happy girl;
4. she was 19 years old,
5. And she liked sport very much,
6. And she was a member in a basketball team;
7. She was one of the best players;
8. Once when they were playing a match with other team by accident/ she fell down,
9. And her leg was broken,
10. And also the nervous central system was injured,
11. So all the doctors told her/ that she would be unable to walk again,
12. But Suzan never felt sad or sorrow/ for what had happened to her,
13. And she believe in God was so strong,
14. And she decided to walk,
15. So she was waking up every day early,
16. And she was training her self on walking/ at least she became able/ to walk,
17. And that good and excellent result astonished all the people around her,
18. And she returned to her life/ which she missed to much, again happy and hopeful.
19. So I liked this film/ because it gave us a good picture/ about how the person can make own life and his own happiness by him self,
20. So when we decide to do something,
21. And we work for this aim.
22. We will certainly reach it/ because nothing impossible/ if we used the qualities/ that God had given to us,



23. And the film told us/ that our belief in God should not lessen/ if we faced any problem.
24. But we must be sure/ that God will help us/ to overcome this trouble,
25. So Suzan's belief in God was strong/ so that helped her to hopeful/ and made her decision to walk again,
26. And she succeeded,
27. Also it showed us/ that everything depends on our well/ because the strong well of the person is very important/ to be able to solve the problems of life,
28. And thinking in future/ and aiming for better life is another basic/ that makes us live and work.
29. Because life doesn't stop/ if we stop working.
30. But life will continue going on with us or without us,
31. And as they said/ " man's well makes miracles."

The mean T-unit length is 11.87 wpt. Further, the mean clauses per T-unit for the above text is 1.80, the highest so far in year 1.

The corresponding script for the above text (written by the same student in year 4) is Ex420.

Moliere in the MISANTHROPE introduced us to several points of view about love through different characters.

the first point of view represented by Alceste, who is a static character. Alceste does not blind himself to the faults of his beloved (Celimene) but he wants to reform her as he says, "My love to the young widow does not blind me to her faults." and he believes that love is not ruled by reason "love is not ruled by reason." While at the same time his beloved Celimene is different from she is a moderate type of woman realistic woman knows the way of life finds that this love of Alceste which is a faithful kind is unique she says to Alceste: "your love is unique indeed" because she finds that flattery is the very essence of love because of this differences in attitudes we find that their love relation failed at the end.

the second point of view represented by Eliante and Philinte, both of them are realistic, moderate people, they know the ways of life. they believe that the lover should blind himself to the faults of his beloved as Eliante says: "the true lover worships the very faults of his beloved" And they believe also that flattery is the essence of love and they find that the lover considers the faults of the beloved as loveable things. these two are prototypes because they exist

in every society. And in the end they succeeded in their relation and married each other.

And we've got one final attitude which is of Acaste, who believes that love should be based on mutual understanding as he says: "they should keep the scale even, there should be give and take on both sides" but Acaste love was one sided love because his beloved who was Celimene didn't love him.

As a conclusion we can say that Eliante stands as the mouth piece of Moliere, because he (Moliere) expressed his own idea through Eliante and we found how he made the love relation between Eliante and Philinte succeed.

When using the T-units segmentation, the text is analysed as follows:

1. Moliere in the MISANTHROPE introduced us to several points of view about love through different characters.
2. The first point of view represented by Alceste,/ who is a static character.
3. Alceste does not blind himself to the faults of his beloved (Celimene)
4. But he wants to reform her/ as he says,/ "My love to the young widow does not blind me to her faults."
5. And he believes/ that love is not ruled by reason/ "love is not ruled by reason."
6. While at the same time his beloved Celimene is different from him
7. She is a moderate type of woman realistic woman knows the way of life finds/ that this love of Alceste/ which is a faithful kind/ is unique
8. She says to Alceste/: "your love is unique indeed"/ because she finds/ that flattery is the very essence of love.
9. Because of this differences in attitudes we find/ that their love relation failed at the end.
10. The second point of view represented by Eliante and Philinte.
11. Both of them are realistic, moderate people.
12. They know the ways of life.
13. They believe/ that the lover should blind himself to the faults of his beloved/ as Eliante says/: "the true lover worships the very faults of his beloved."
14. And they believe also/ that flattery is the essence of love.
15. And they find/ that the lover considers the faults of the beloved as loveable things.
16. These two are prototypes/ because they exist in every society.
17. And in the end they succeeded in their relation/ and married each other.

18. And we've got one final attitude/ which is of Acaste,/ who believes/ that love should be based on mutual understanding/ as he says/: "they should keep the scale even,/ there should be give and take on both sides."

19. But Acaste love was one sided love/ because his beloved/ who was Celimene/ didn't love him.

20. As a conclusion we can say/ that Eliante stands as the mouth piece of Moliere,/ because he (Moliere) expressed his own idea through Eliante

21. And we found/ how he made the love relation between Eliante and Philinte/ succeed.

The mean T-unit length for the above text is 16.71 wpt as compared with the same student's work in year 1 of 11.87 wpt. The increase in length is 4.51 wpt. In addition, the mean clauses per T-unit for the above text is 2.52 cpt, the highest so far in year 4. This shows an average increase of 0.72 cpt.

With respect to the sentence length in words number (wps) regarding the three pairs of texts segmented above, the following results are shown in the Table 4.3 below:

**Table 4.3: Average Sentence Length**

Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/ Decrease
1	10.6	19.2	+7.6.4
10	20.3	19.3	-1
20	122.7	31.8	-90.91.2
<b>Mean Sentence length</b>	20.5	23.4	+2.9
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	10	7.24	2.76

When measuring the length of T-units for the same pairs of texts, we get the following results as shown in Table 4.4 below:

**Table 4.4: Average T-units Length**

Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/ Decrease
1	8.84	17	+8.16
10	12.2	18.5	+6.3
20	11.87	16.71	+4.84
<b>Mean T-unit length</b>	10.97	17.40	+6.43
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	1.85	1.14	0.71

The differences are clear between the two tables: First, there is no single instance of decrease in the second table: all fourth year students demonstrated an increase in the mean length of T- units. Second, the increase whether on the individual level or the group one is around 5 wpt; the highest is 7.52 wpt. This increase in the mean length of the units is consistent. Finally, there is a strong evidence that first year students have not mastered sentence punctuation since the data contains many ‘run-on’ sentences, where a full-stop is required in normal English punctuation.

Moreover, when the same procedure, namely T-units segmentation, was applied to the whole sample of this current study, a consistent pattern emerged of the students’ writing development. Table 4.5 below shows the average T-units length for students’ essays:

**Table 4.5 Average T-unit length in words for students' essays**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>
1	8.8	17
2	13.8	18.6
3	14.7	17.3
4	14.3	15.4
5	10.8	24.4
6	15.7	17.1
7	14.4	17.4
8	13.4	19.7
9	12.2	15.4
10	11.4	18.5
11	13	13.4
12	10.6	11.3
13	11.1	16.3
14	10.9	15
15	18.1	14.8
16	12.2	19.3
17	10.5	12.9
18	13.3	14.5
19	11.5	14.4
20	11.8	16.7
21	11.7	13.2
22	13.5	15.5
23	12	20.5
24	13.6	19.1
25	15.5	19.2
26	15.5	16.7
27	12.3	18.6
28	13.4	13.9
29	14.5	14.3
30	17.6	14
<b>Mean T-unit length</b>	13.14	16.26
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	2.12	2.81

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 5.24; df; 29

P-value= 0.001, which is highly significant at 0.01 level.

Moreover, table 4.6 below shows the sentence length and T-unit of all data:

**Table 4.6: Average sentence length and T-unit length**

Average Sentence Length				Average T-unit Length			
No. Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/decrease	No. of Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/decrease
1	10.6	19.2	+9.6	1	8.8	17	+8.2
2	55.3	121.5	+66.2	2	13.8	18.6	+4.8
3	26.1	29.6	+3.5	3	14.7	17.3	+2.4
4	26.7	16.3	-10.4	4	14.3	15.4	+1.1
5	16.3	26.6	+10.3	5	10.8	24.4	+13.6
6	78.5	14	-64.5	6	15.7	17.1	+1.4
7	20.2	19.3	-0.9	7	14.4	17.4	+3
8	71.7	128.5	+56.8	8	13.4	19.7	+6.3
9	16.9	16.5	-0.4	9	12.2	15.4	+3.2
10	20.3	19.3	-1	10	11.4	18.5	+7.1
11	16.4	16.4	=	11	13	13.4	+0.4
12	13.3	15.9	+2.6	12	10.6	11.3	+0.7
13	24.2	22.5	-1.8	13	11.1	16.3	+5.2
14	14.8	18.8	+6	14	10.9	15	+4.1
15	24	14.8	-10.8	15	18.1	14.8	-3.3
16	20.3	24.9	+4.6	16	12.2	19.3	+7.1
17	21.5	14.1	-7.4	17	10.5	12.9	+2.4
18	34.8	16.6	-18.2	18	13.3	14.5	1.2
19	46	19.3	-26.7	19	11.5	14.4	+2.9
20	122.7	31.8	-90.9	20	11.8	16.7	+4.9
21	36.2	13.3	-22.9	21	11.7	13.2	+1.5
22	35.2	18.2	-17	22	13.5	15.5	+2
23	22.9	30.1	+7.2	23	12	20.5	+8.5
24	21	23.5	+2.5	24	13.6	19.1	+5.5
25	25.3	24.7	-0.6	25	15.5	19.2	+3.7
26	21.1	17.7	-3.4	26	15.5	16.7	+1.2
27	26.1	22.1	-4	27	12.3	18.6	+6.3
28	24.4	20.1	-4.3	28	13.4	13.9	+0.5
29	19.8	16.6	-3.2	29	14.5	14.3	-0.2
30	18.9	16.6	-2.3	30	17.6	14	-3.4
<b>Mean sentence length</b>	30.9	26.7	-4.2	<b>Mean T-unit length</b>	13.14	16.26	+3.12
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	23.60	27.10	3.50	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	2.12	2.81	0.69

As the results show in the table 4.6, we notice clearer and significant differences in the sentence length between the results obtained before using T-units and those after using T-units. Further, the mean sentence length for the two years is 30.9 and 26.7 wps respectively, whereas the mean of the T-units is 13.14 and 16.26 wpt

respectively. This shows an average decrease in the sentence length of 4.2 wps and an average increase in the T-unit length of 3.12 wpt.

Another point is that when measuring the sentence length in words only 11 students (36% which is a low and negative percentage) out of 30 increased their sentence length, while in the T-units the majority of students, 27 (90% which is a high and positive percentage) out of 30, increased their T-unit length. In terms of decrease of sentence length, 18 students (60% which is a high and negative percentage) out 30 decreased their sentence length, while in the T-units only 3 students (10% which is a low and positive percentage) out of 30 decreased their T-unit length.

In addition, when counting the number of clauses per T-unit for the whole sample of this study, the group averages for both years were as follows: 1.60 and 2.30 respectively, with an overall increase of 0.70, which is reasonable.

It might be interesting here to compare Hunt's results of young native speaker learners writing at different grades with the results of this current study with respect to the mean length of T-units and the mean number of clauses per T-unit. Table 4.7 below shows the results of Hunt's study and the current study in terms of Mean length of T-units:

**Table 4.7: Comparison of average length of T-units in the two Studies**

Hunt's Study			The Current Study	
Grade 4	Grade 8	Grade 12	Year 1	Year 4
8.6	11.5	14.4	13.14	16.26

In both studies there is a gradual increase in the length of T-units, on the average level in particular. This shows measurable evidence of the development of writing as far as the length of T-units is concerned. It might be worth noting that year 1 of Syrian universities is roughly the equivalent of United States Grade 12, that is to say that the students have been in full-time education for 12 years. Further, it is not surprising if the average T-units for year 1 are lower than that of 12 Graders in America, when taking into account the fact that year 1 students are overseas learners

of English, and they are taught English as a second language. But in the case of year 4 students the length of their T-units is higher than Hunt's 12 graders, which indicates that they are at a more advanced level.

Of particular interest is, moreover, to compare the fourth year students of the current study with Hunt's adults native learners in terms of length of T-units. Table 4.8 below shows the results as follows:

**Table 4.8: comparison between Hunt's adults and Year 4 students of the current study**

Type of Learners	Length of T-units
Hunt's Adults	20.3
Year 4 Students	16.26

As the figures in table 4.8 above indicate, we notice that year 4 students are far behind Hunt's adults native learners relative to their T-units length, which is not surprising because the subjects of the current study are Overseas learners of English and are taught English in a second language context. By careful designing materials and teaching techniques these students might catch up and become better writers nearer the native speaker writers. Another point is that Hunt's subjects are 'experienced' writers because they have published some of their writing in two famous magazines (**Harper and Atlantic**), whereas the subjects of the current study have never published any piece of their writing in any place of publication.

Hunt (1977) conducted a more detailed study which included T-unit results for average adult as well as skilled adult writers. These results compare with the Syrian students as follows:

**Table 4. 9 Comparison between Hunt's adult writers and the subject of the present study**

Type of Learners	Length of T-units
Average adults	11.9
Skilled adults	14.8
Year 1 Students	13.14
Year 4 Students	16.26



It will be seen that Syrian students can be compared more favourably with the 'average adult' native speakers, who had completed high school but were not working in academic fields.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In concluding this chapter, I could say again that using T-units has shown a better and reasonable indication of the development of students' writing over the period of their study as far as sentence structure is concerned; this development of students' writing is obscured when only formal sentence length is measured because of the students' erratic use of punctuation, in particular of the full- stop. Further, this does not mean that punctuation should be neglected; on the contrary special emphasis should be given to punctuation, and learners should be taught properly how to punctuate their written English correctly. It seems that the students know about the grammar of English sentence structure, but they have failed to display this knowledge on the page.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Further grammatical Areas

Chapter five is concerned with students' use of some grammatical features in their writing. These features involve the use of 'conjunctives', relatives, spelling mistakes, the passive and the use of the third person pronouns.

### 5.1 The frequency of some conjunctives found in the data

In the coming section I list some linking devices, namely 'conjunctive adjuncts' and 'conjunctions', Halliday's terms, which join clauses and sections of text together, found in the data of this study. These devices are listed according to their popularity, that is their frequencies, and a comparison is made of their use in Year 1 and Year 4. This frequency study was conducted with the use of a computational search for each of the conjuncts listed below in table 5.1. One problem, one should note, that arises with this method of analysis is that the computer identifies all instances of the searched word even when they perform different grammatical functions. For instance, 'for' appears in the corpus as both a conjunct ('The cyclist was responsible *for* it was not allowed') and as a preposition ('I went to the bus-stop and waited *for* the bus'). Therefore, the researcher had to decide on the function of certain words in specific instances and the analysis could not be completely formal. In the table below, the first figure indicates the frequency of the word used as a conjunct; the second figure (in brackets) indicates to the total frequency of the word.

A further problem with this analysis is the distinction between conjunctive adjuncts (Halliday: 1985: 49) and subordinate conjunctions. Although the distinction is theoretically clear, the students are not always able to distinguish the classes and might use a conjunctive adjunct to join two clauses. Since there is a semantic similarity between conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts, the researcher has decided to include those used in this analysis.

**Table 5.1: Frequency of conjuncts found in the corpus of this study**

<b>Conjuncts</b>	<b>Frequency in year 1</b>	<b>Frequency in year 4</b>	<b>Increase/ Decrease</b>
and	302	319	+17
but	55	49	-6
because	38	47	+9
so	37	27	-10
when	29	41	+12
or	15	8	-7
if	14	16	+2
while	6 (12)	2 (4)	-8
(al)though	6	14	+8
for	6 (43)	3 (55)	-3
after	4 (27)	17 (18)	+13
whereas	4	-	-4
as if	4	1	-3
once	3	1	-2
as a result	3	-	-3
in spite of	2	-	-2
instead of	2	-	-2
so that	2	1	-1
till	2	2	=
neither	2	-	-2
consequently	2	1	-1
until	2	-	-2
even	2 (5)	4 (8)	+2
before	1 (3)	4 (7)	+3
however	1	1	=
hence	1	1	=
thus	1	2	+1
therefore	-	7	+7
yet	-	1	+1
despite that	-	3	+3
nevertheless	-	6	+6
as soon as	-	2	+2

Regarding some conjuncts, such as ‘for that reason’, ‘in case’ and ‘otherwise’, based on Halliday’s list (1985: 304-305), the data did not reveal any presence of these conjuncts.

As expected, the table above shows that the more frequent conjunctives in both years are those of co-ordination, followed by those of reasons. Further, ‘and’, alone, is

actually used by all students in both years, whereas other devices such as ‘in that case’ and ‘otherwise’ are not used at all by any students in either year, which is surprising. The reason behind the frequent use of ‘and’ might be that co-ordination is basic and very frequent in all languages. In Arabic in particular, it is not surprising if ‘and’ is dominant. The low frequency of other conjunctives might be due to students’ lack of knowledge of these devices, or possibly to the fact that such devices are not given proper attention in their courses.

## 5.2 Classifying conjuncts

Now I comment briefly on the uses of these devices in the actual data. I have classified the conjunctives into six groups according to the semantic relationship expressed: (A) co-ordination, (B) cause and effect, (C) condition, (D) time, (E) concession and (F) adversative & contrastive relationship.

### 5.2.1 Co-ordination

#### • AND

As was mentioned earlier, ‘and’ is used by all students in both years with the highest occurrences 302 and 319 respectively. The highest frequencies in both years, further, which were 23 and 28 occurred in text 25 and 12 respectively.

#### How ‘and’ is used in first year

(1) ‘and’ in 116 cases out of 302 is used to join words or phrases of the same class such as:

- (a) Noun(s): “... full of *beautiful pieces of music and songs*”
- (b) Adjectives: “... to make *strange and funny* movements”
- (c) Adverbs: “... she is treated more *badly and cruelly*”
- (d) Verbs: “... a man *came and stood*”
- (e) Present Participle: “... he was *faltering and loitering*”
- (f) Past Participle: “... every idea to be *shown and felt* clearly”
- (g) Particles: “... go *up and down*”

(2) ‘And’ in 186 cases is used to join clauses or sentences such as:

- (i) “Events goes [sic] on *and* problems increase”
- (ii) “... man who began to regain his mind. *And* I didn’t know what happened”

In ten cases, ‘and’ is used with other subordinate connectors such as because, while, if and when. Examples are given below:

- “... **and because** he did not think, he laughed with them.”
- “..., **and if** we have a good one we should thank God for this.”
- “... **and when** I remember this story I became to be ill.”
- “... **and while** I was walking on the street ..., I saw ....”

Moreover, when ‘and’ is used to conjoin full clauses, it appears that students use it to express different relationships between the clauses. This is certainly the most advanced use of ‘and’ noted in the data, but there are relatively few instances of this use.

1. “... that love is a good habit and hate is a bad habit”. (**contrast**)
2. “So I went to the bus- stop and waited for the bus”. (**time**)
3. “... she felt (sic) down and her leg was broken” (**cause and effect**)
4. “...the window is broken and he stands still..”. (**concession**)

#### **How ‘and’ is used in fourth year**

(1) In 180 out of 319 ‘and’ is used to join words or phrases of the same class such as:

- (a) Nouns: “Odysseus depend[s] on *his mind and heart*”.
- (b) Adjectives: “He is *moderate and realistic*...”
- (c) Adverbs: “... *clearly and wisely*...”
- (d) Verbs: “... I should *provide and furnish* for you”.
- (e) Present participle: “... after *leaving* Troy *and seeking* to find...”.
- (f) Infinitive: “I am the first *to see and condemn* them”.
- (g) Past Participle: “... the conception of love is *presented and seen*...”

(2) Whereas in 139 cases, ‘and’ is used to join clauses or sentences such as:

- (i) “... love is on the top of her mouth, *and* she fails at the end...”.
- (ii) “The play is that of ideas. *And* the conception of love is ...”.

Further, in ten cases ‘and’ is used with other subordinate connectors such as **because**, **after** and **when**. Examples are given below:

“because both of them are the only moderate characters in the play **and because** both of them have the same concept of love.”

“So after they drank the poisoned wine they changed (sic) into pigs **and after** Odysseus heard that he decided to go to her by himself.”

“One of Odysseus’ heroic achievement is when he overcomes Cyclops, the giant, by his wit and bravery, **and when** he can escape from him with his men... .”

Moreover the following meanings can be noticed in these occurrences:

1. “Those men went to her house and entered her room...”. (**time**)
2. “... both of them become friends and she gets a child from him”. (**cause and effect**)
3. “... the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished”. (**contrast**)

Generally speaking, the use of ‘and’ in year 1 and year 4 is almost the same except for the fact that the frequency of ‘and’ in year 4 is a little higher than in year 1. The reason behind this, I suggest, might be either that the students in both years feel proficient in using ‘and’, and less proficient in using other conjunctions. Thus they stay with what they know. However, if we take into account the relative length of the essays, we can see that the use of ‘and’ in year 4 is less than in year 1. In year 4 we have an average of 3.3 words per 100 words but in year 1 there is an average of 3.9 words.

#### • But

The majority of students in both years (25 out of 30) used ‘but’, but those who did not use it are not the same students, namely 10, 16, 19, 22, 8 (in year 1) and 13, 14, 21, 27 and 30 (in year 4) . In eight and thirteen cases out of 55 and 49 respectively in which ‘but’ is found, it is used with other connectors such as *also*, *in fact*, *because* and *nevertheless*. In most cases, further, in both years ‘but’ is used to join clauses or sentences except in one case in the first year and four cases in fourth year, where ‘but’ is used to join two clauses as in the following:

- (i) “... he tries six times, **but** he fails in each attempt”. (**clauses**)

- (ii) "... so he suffers a lot. *But* it goes without saying that...". (cohesive link between sentences)
- (iii) "... who has no place to sleep in *but* a bench park". ( phrase + phrase)
- (iv) "... his address was not only disarming, *but* full of subtlety". (clause + phrase)

## • OR

'Or' is used by 9 students in the first year (with 13 occurrences) and 6 students in the fourth year (with 8 occurrences); only two students (24 and 30) used 'or' in both years.

Out of the 15 occurrences in first year, there are 6 cases in which 'or' is used to join clauses as in:

"... to yield the floor to capitalism *or* there will be a great attack..."

"Let peace prevails *or* we defend".

Whereas the other cases, 'or' is used to join phrases or 'minimal groups' as in:

"... without causing death *or* harms..."

"... it may be social, economical *or* political subjects".

In year 4, there were 8 occurrences; in 6 cases 'or' is used to join phrases as in the following:

"... whether he is *human or a god ....*"

"... he is a god *or* semi-god".

While in the other two cases, 'or' is used to join clauses as in:

"... she is told by the Giant-Slayer *or* to expect Odysseus..."

"... they may fall in love or feel jealous".

## • Neither... Nor

'Neither... nor' is only used twice in year 1, by two students. In both cases, 'neither... nor' is used to join phrases as follows:

"... without causing death or harms *neither* to the driver *nor* to the cyclist".

"... I have realised that *neither* money *nor* jewels can bring happiness..."

Possible explanations for the rare use in year 1 and absence of 'neither... nor' in year 4 might be that the topics do not require this conjunctive form. However, most students may not know the expression.

### 5.2.2 Cause and effect

Four conjuncts were found in the corpus of the current study, which are dealt with separately as follows:

- **Because**

In each year, roughly speaking, about 20 students used ‘because’ 38 (year 1) and 47 (year 4) times. Four students who did not use ‘because’ in the first year used it in the fourth year, and five students who used ‘because’ in the first year did not use it in the fourth year. In the former case this might indicate an increase in the students’ knowledge of these connectors, while in the latter, it might be the case that students have used different devices in the expression of reason or may not have wished to indicate this relationship at all.

Moreover, the majority of ‘because’ clauses come second, that is at the end position in the sentence, after the main clause. Examples are given below:

“But Farid was happy *because* he worked hard ...”.

“So, she fails in her love *because* she is unable to accept ...”.

- **So**

‘So’ is used by 18 students in the first year with 37 occurrences, and by 15 students in the fourth year with 27 occurrences. Out of the thirty students in both years, 7 students have not used ‘so’ at all, which might be due to the lack of their knowledge of this word, and 5 students who did not use ‘so’ in the first year have used it in the fourth year, which might indicate development. However, it is difficult to make such conclusion since 10 students who used ‘so’ in the first year did not use it in the fourth year.

Two additional points can be added here. One is that 5 occurrences of ‘so’ (4 in the first year and 1 in the fourth year), have the meaning of ‘very’, rather than a connector as in:

“... yet Odysseus was *so* faithful to the institution of marriage...”.

“... she believes in God was *so* strong (sic)”.



The second is that in the first year, 'so' is preceded by a comma in 15 cases, by a full stop in 13 (35%) cases and by no punctuation marks in 4 cases; whereas in the fourth year 'so' is preceded by a full stop in 21 (77%) cases, by a comma in 2 cases and by no punctuation marks in 4 cases. This might affect the average sentence length of fourth year students by reducing it, I suggest.

- **For**

The concordance list of 'for' shows a high frequency (43 and 55 respectively), but the actual count as a conjunct is 6 and 3 respectively. The reason behind this is that 'for', in the majority of cases, has been used as a preposition rather than a reason conjunct. Examples of the use of 'for' as a reason conjunct are:

"... has a commanding type of love, *for* he wants to improve his ...".

"... the cyclist was responsible, *for* it was not allowed for cyclists to drive ...".

- **Therefore**

'Therefore' is only used by fourth year students ( 6 students with 7 occurrences); this indicates an increase in their knowledge of this connector, when compared to first year students, who did not use it at all.

It can be noticed that 'therefore' is preceded by a full stop in 3 cases, by a comma in 3 other cases and by no punctuation marks in 1 case.

- **As a result**

'As a result' is only used by first year students (3 students who used it once each, that is 3 total occurrences). In one case it was used with 'of', where it did not join two clauses, as in ("And, as a result of the accident, the front part of the car had been badly damaged"). An example of its use is given below:

"... accusing him being a thief and *as a result* he is sent to prison".

It is strange why it is not used by fourth year students. All I can suggest here for its absence is that the nature of the topics in the fourth year. However, the heroic achievements of Odysseus would appear to be the type of essay where this expression

would prove useful as is the topic in the first year of a car accident for example. But it is clearly not in the repertoire of most students.

- **Consequently, Thus and Hence**

The above connectors are similarly used by students in both years with respect to their number of occurrences, which is not more than 2 occurrences as is the case with the connectors number 6 and 7. In the other cases they are used just once.

### 5.2.3 Conditionals

- **If**

Only 'if' is found as a conditional conjunct in the data of this study. 'If' is used by 11 students in the first year and 13 students in the fourth year with 14 and 16 occurrences respectively. Four students who used 'if' in both years; seven students used 'if' in the first year but did not use it in the fourth year and nine students used 'if' in the first year and also used it in the fourth, which shows an increase in these students' use of 'if'.

In first year, in 9 cases 'if' is preceded by other connectors such as **and**, **even** and **as**, whereas in fourth year in 5 cases it is preceded by connectors **as**, **even** and **because**.

In all cases of 'if' occurrences in the fourth year the 'if' clause comes first, leaving the main clause to end position, whereas in the first year we have five cases of 'if' clause in the end position. Examples are given below respectively:

“... *if* he refuses Circe will make him ...”.

“... man should admit his faults even *if* they are the way of ...”.

### 5.2.4 Time

To express time relations, the following conjuncts are found in the data, arranged according to their popularity

- **When**

The most popular subordinate conjunction of time is 'when'. In the first year out of the 29, in 16 cases the 'when' clause comes first; the rest come final position. In the

fourth year out of the 41, 25 cases of 'when' clause comes final; the rest initial.

Examples are given below respectively:

"**When** I turned back I saw a car ...".

"... had lost their father **when** they are small".

"His moral integrity was clear **when** he approached ...".

"**When** he went there she was amazed ...".

- **After**

Only 4 cases are found where 'after' is used as a time conjunct although the computer identified 27 cases of 'after' used as a preposition. Out of these 4, 3 have the 'after' clause as initial; the other clause as final. Examples are given below:

"**After** the accident had happened, the driver ...".

"...he refused to sell his country **after** he had been given the choice ...".

In the fourth year, on the other hand, out of 18, in only one case is 'after' used as a preposition; in the other 17 cases it is used as a time conjunct. Out of these 17, 9 cases in which 'after' clause comes initial; the other 8 cases it comes finally. Examples are given below:

"**After** blinding his eyes, the Cyclops started ...".

"But Odysseus sleeps with her **after** her promising not to deceive him".

- **While**

In the first year out of 12, there are only 6 cases in which 'while' is used as a time conjunct; in the other cases 'while' is used as an adversative or it is confused with 'while' to mean 'a short time' as in ("After a while he began to dance"). In all of these cases the 'while' clause comes initially. Examples are given below respectively:

"**While** I was watching the television yesterday, I saw a film which influenced me so much".

"..., the right part displays the "White House", **while** the left part displays the Kremlin".

In the fourth year, on the other hand, out of 4 cases, only 2 cases in which ‘while’ is used as a time connector; the other two cases it is used as an adversative for comparison. Examples are given below respectively:

“*While* the Cyclops is asleep, Odysseus and his friends manage to spur its only eye with a very big hot piece of wood”.

“If we make a random comparison between him and other characters in the Odyssey, we will see how Odysseus is upheld to be a semi-god, *while* others seem in their recklessness and inconsistency as dwarfs”.

- **Once**

In the first year, in the 3 cases of occurrence ‘once’, it is used with the meaning of ‘one time in the past’ as a simple time adjunct. In the fourth year, however, ‘once’ is used as a subordinate conjunction with the meaning of ‘when’ or ‘as soon as’. The examples below are given respectively:

“*Once* I watched a very interesting film...”.

“... the cause of his resistance that drug *once* he had taken it...”.

- **Before**

In the first year out of 3 cases, there is only 1 case in which ‘before’ is used as a time conjunct; in the other two cases ‘before’ is used as a special preposition. The examples are given respectively:

“... and the film writer warn the world, not to threaten the poor peace and asks them to decrease their dangerous, panic forces and weapons *before* it gets too late,...”.

“He was not looking *before* him but round him”.

- **Till**

In the first year, in the 2 cases ‘till’ introduces the clause following the main clause. Similarly, in the fourth year, except in one case in which ‘till’ comes as an initial preposition (“till now”) but with the meaning of ‘up to this moment’. Examples are given below respectively:

“... she is treated more badly and cruelly *till* she escape[s] ...”.

“... and Odysseus follows her plan *till* he achieves what he wants ...”.

- **Until**

‘Until’ is only used by first year students with 3 occurrences, out of which in one case ‘until’ comes initially as a simple time adjunct with the meaning ‘up to this time’. In the other cases ‘until’ is used as a subordinate conjunct. Examples are given below:

“We tried to avoid him *until* the bus came ...”.

“... from that time *until* now I have heard nothing ...”.

- **As soon as**

There are 2 occurrences used only by fourth year students , a sign of increase in their knowledge of this connector. In both cases ‘as soon as’ comes initially as in:

“*As soon as* they eat the food they are ...”.

### 5.2.5 Concession

- **(Al)though**

‘Although’ is seen in both positions, initially and finally, with different emphasis, of course. Examples are given below respectively:

“... enjoyed watching this valuable film *although* it was frightened...”.

“*Although* this man is poor he is ...”.

“... Alceste and Celimene love each other *although* they are at the opposite ...”.

“*Although* she has done her best to let him stay, but Odysseus refuses...”.

- **Even**

Out of the total occurrences in both years, only in 3 cases (1 in the first year and 2 in the fourth year) is ‘even’ used as a connector between clauses; otherwise it is used as a ‘focusing adverb’. Examples are given below:

“... the homing instinct survives *even* when the home is a park bench ...”

“... let goddess sleep with a man *even* if it is done without ...”

Other connectors such as ‘in spite of’, ‘instead of’ ‘yet’, and ‘despite’ are rarely used. The two former are only used by first year students, while the two latter are only used by fourth year students.

### 5.2.6 Adversative and Contrastive Relationship

Under adversative and contrast, only three conjunctives: (1) However, (2) Nevertheless and (3) Whereas, were found in this data. With respect to ‘however’, it is used by one student from each year with 1 occurrence in each. What is interesting here is that the student is found the same in both years, namely number one.

Regarding ‘nevertheless’, it is only used by fourth year students (5 students) with 6 occurrences. It is a sign of an increase of the students’ use of this word. In 4 cases ‘nevertheless’ is used exactly the same in a quoted material and it comes initially; in the other two cases it is preceded by ‘but’. Examples are given below:

“*Nevertheless* I long to reach my home and see the happy day of my return.”

“... mortality and ageless youth, *but nevertheless* he refuses her offer.”

In the case of ‘whereas’, only fourth year students (2 students) used it with 4 occurrences (2 each).

### 5.3 Relatives

In this section I list the relative pronouns according to their frequencies as used by students in both years 1 and 4. Then I comment on them where relevant and needed.

Table 5.2 below shows the frequency of the relative pronouns found in this data:

**Table 5.2: Frequency of Relative pronouns**

Relatives	Frequency in Year 1	Frequency in Year 4	Increase/ Decrease
who	23	55	+32
which	37	52	+15
that	10 (101)	11 (106)	+1
where	4	11	+7
whose	3	1	-2
whom	-	2	+2

#### • WHO

‘Who’ is used by students both in first and fourth years (14 and 24 students) with occurrences 23 and 53 respectively. This shows an increase in its use by 10 students. It might be interesting here to point out that the majority, if not all, of ‘who’ clauses in the first year are defining (restrictive), while in the fourth year (47 out of 55) there

is a high percentage of non-defining clauses. The reason behind this, I suggest, is that the antecedent in the first year (such as cyclist, man and person) is indefinite and thus it needs more restriction. Whereas the antecedents in the fourth year (proper names such as Odysseus, Hermes, Moliere) are already defined and known and thus they do not need any further restriction. Examples are given below respectively:

“It was about a man *who* is accused as a thief ...”.

“It is Odysseus, *who* could ravage Troy ...”.

- **Which**

‘Which’ is used by students in both years (19 and 22 students) with occurrences 37 and 52 respectively, which shows an increase of use by some students. Defining relative clauses with ‘which’ are dominant in both years because the antecedents (such as film, quality) are not already defined. Examples are given below:

“... then another man went to the shop *which* is near the place”.

“... , the true love is that love which gives without return”.

- **That**

‘That’ is used by students in both years ( the majority) with high occurrences (101 and 106 respectively) as the concordance list shows. But actually as a ‘relative pronoun’ the number is only 10 and 11. The reason behind the high frequency of ‘that’ is that in most cases ‘that’ is used to introduce ‘projections’ such as reported speech clauses. The type of relative clauses with ‘that’ as a relative pronoun is defining. They are used by both first and fourth year students. Examples are given below:

“... a film like the film *that* I have seen recently”.

“... to put it in the wine *that* Circe would offer him ...”.

- **Whom**

‘Whom’ is used only by fourth year students (2 students) with two occurrences. The reasons behind this low percentage of ‘whom’, I suggest, might be that it is thought to be and the optional use of ‘who’ or the use of a contact clause is preferred.

- **Whose**

‘Whose’ is used by very few students in both years (2 in first year and 1 in fourth year).

- **where**

‘Where’ is used by students in both years ( 3 and 4 students respectively) with occurrences 4 and 10 respectively. In all cases ‘where’ is used to define the places in which the action took place.

Moreover, it might be of particular interest, it seems to me, to compare the frequencies of the relative pronouns in this current study with the same relatives which occurred in the Spoken English Corpus (SEC) with its different texts (see Meygle 1992:14). Table 5.3 below shows the comparison of the frequency of relative pronouns found in two different corpora.

**Table 5.3: Comparing the frequency of relative pronouns found in the Spoken English Corpus and the data of the current study**

Relative Pronouns	SEC (14000 words approximately in length)	First Year (7599 words in length)	Fourth Year (9423 words in length)
Who	86 (0.63%)	23 (0.30%)	55 (0.58%)
Which	97 (0.70%)	37 (0.48%)	52 (0.55%)
That	54 (0.39%)	10 (0.13%)	11 (0.11%)
Where	27 (0.9%)	4 (0.05%)	11 (0.11%)
Whom	5 (0.03%)	0	2 (0.02%)
Whose	5 (0.03%)	3 (0.03%)	1 (0.01%)
Total	274	77	132

Thus, we can see a clear progression in the students’ use of relative pronouns, particularly of ‘who’ and ‘which’, where the percentage figures (0.58% and 0.55%) are close to the Spoken English Corpus (0.63% and 0.70%).



Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the frequency of relative pronouns in this study with those in a study of a written corpus. A suitable corpus would be that of Huddleston (1971), but unfortunately his data is presented in such a way as to make the comparison impossible since he only presents raw data (rather than percentages) in tables comparing restrictive and non-restrictive clauses.

#### **5.4 Spelling mistakes**

A specific problem which is frequently mentioned in the literature concerns the spelling in English. This problem in ESL context might be caused partially by the 'intricacies' or exceptions of English spelling system and partially by the differences in sound-spelling correspondence in native and target languages. Two relevant studies were reported in the literature survey regarding spelling mistakes made by university Arab learners. They are compared with the current study later in this section.

In this section of the current study I investigated and compared all spelling mistakes made by students in the first and fourth year. A complete list of these words with their correct forms is given in the appendix 5. Further, these spelling mistakes are classified into groups, followed by a brief comment on them.

**Table 5.4: Spelling mistakes found in students' exam scripts**

No. of Scripts	No. of mistakes in Year 1	Text Length	percentage of total words spelt incorrectly	No. of mistakes in Year 4	Text Length	percentage of total words spelt incorrectly	Increase/decrease of percentages
1	4	169	2.36	2	442	0.45	-1.91
2	3	166	1.80	0	486	0	-1.80
3	6	340	1.76	4	533	0.75	-1.1
4	0	187	0	1	325	0.30	+0.30
5	3	98	3.60	2	293	0.68	-2.92
6	6	157	3.8	6	307	1.9	-1.9
7	0	202	0	0	348	0	0
8	4	215	1.86	0	257	0	-1.86
9	1	270	0.37	1	231	0.43	+0.06
10	4	183	2.18	4	443	0.90	-2.28
11	3	246	1.21	0	295	0	-1.21
12	1	212	0.47	2	306	0.65	+0.18
13	3	266	1.12	0	180	0	-1.12
14	0	251	0	1	225	0.44	+0.44
15	2	361	0.55	0	163	0	-0.55
16	2	272	0.73	1	299	0.33	-0.40
17	9	279	3.22	2	155	1.29	-1.93
18	3	313	0.95	1	233	0.42	-0.53
19	3	184	1.63	2	347	0.57	-1.06
20	12	368	3.26	1	350	0.28	-2.98
21	5	434	1.15	4	372	1.07	-1.08
22	6	176	3.40	0	310	0	-3.40
23	2	252	0.79	1	452	0.22	-0.57
24	4	356	1.12	0	305	0	-1.12
25	3	405	0.74	1	519	0.19	-0.55
26	3	233	1.28	2	318	0.62	-0.66
27	3	235	1.27	1	243	0.41	-0.86
28	4	268	1.49	2	181	1.10	-0.39
29	0	218	0	0	229	0	=
30	0	283	0	0	266	0	=
<b>Total</b>	99	7599	41.66	41	9423	11.97	-29.69
<b>Mean</b>	3.3	253	1.40	1.3	314	0.43	-0.97

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 5.30; df: 29

P-value= 0.001, which is highly significant at 0.01 level.

The figure in the table above shows the number of spelling mistakes in fourth year scripts to be less than half of those in year one (41 and 99 respectively). Further, the

majority of students (20) in the fourth year, which is a reasonable percentage (67%), have shown a significant improvement by decreasing their spelling mistakes whereas only four students out of thirty in the fourth year (13.2%) have increased their percentages of spelling mistakes. Two of these cases, however, I suggest, have written more words than in first year essays (325 and 306 in contrast to 187 and 212); this reason might contribute to the increase in the spelling mistakes. Whereas the other cases, surprisingly enough, the students have written less than in the first year (231 and 225 in contrast to 270 and 251), which is untypical.

Four students out of thirty have kept the same number of errors ( listed in descending order: 6, 4, 3 and 1) as in the corresponding essays in first year ( three of them have written more and the other one has written less).

Three students out of thirty further have not made any spelling mistakes in their writing in both first and fourth year.

#### **5.4.1 Types of spelling mistakes in Students' scripts**

In this section, I classify the spelling mistakes made by both groups of students, each is dealt separately in turn for the sake of the ease comparison between them.

##### **First Year**

If we go throughout the spelling mistakes made by first year students, we might classify them as follows:

**(1) Over-generalisation:** here we find irregular verbs treated as regular verbs such as *hitted* for *hit*, *beated* for *beat* and *beared* for *bore*. It could be argued that students who do not know irregular verbs are making errors in grammar rather than spelling. But there are sufficient ambiguous cases to make it difficult to categorise as one or the other. I have somewhat arbitrarily decide to include them under spelling.

**(2) Dropping or Adding Final (e):** words such as *contin*, *increas* and *Whit House*, on the one hand and words such as *beliefe*, *worke* and *aimlessly* on the other hand,

are found in this category. The reason behind these errors, it seems to me, is the complexity of the spelling system of English; there are many cases of words that do not have final 'e' on the one hand such as 'blind', 'right' and 'light', and words that have final 'e' on the other hand such as 'write', 'white' and 'site'. The students, in particular non-native speakers, therefore might be confused when to drop or keep the final 'e'. Further in Arabic, we do not have words that end in mute or silent vowels as /e/, whereas in English the case is quite possible and often. Arab students therefore are confused when they should keep it or drop it.

**(3) Keeping or changing (Y) when suffixes are added:** words such as *replys* for 'replies' and *obeied* for 'obeyed' are found here. It seems that the students have not mastered the rules concerning 'y', which have a lot of exceptions, when suffixes are added to it; some native speakers might make mistakes in these words.

**(4) Keeping 'LL' in the suffix 'full' when added to other words** such as *hopfull*. This category, it seems to me, is not a major problem; careful attention might lead to the absence of such spelling mistakes. *Hopfull* also can fall in category number 2, namely dropping final (e).

**(5) i/e Confusion**, such as *destrict* ( occurred twice in the same script)

This confusion might be due to the complexity of the spelling system of English. There are many cases where words that have 'i' or 'e' such as 'bill', 'bit', 'be' and 'dedstruction' can stand for the phoneme /ai/. Thus it is not surprising if learners, especially non-native, make errors in these words.

**(6) ve/fe Confusion**, such as *beliefe* in place of *believe*

**(7) ee/ea Confusion** in words such as *chease* and *sweat* instead of *cheese* and *sweet*

The reason behind these errors, I think, might be due to the complexity of the spelling system of English. There are many cases of words that have either 'ee' or 'ea' (even 'I') such as 'meet', 'meat', 'see' and 'sea' can represent the phoneme /i/. Therefore students, especially the non-native, might be confused in spelling these words.

**(8) G/C and S/C confusion** as in *grazy* instead of *crazy* and *sircumstances* of *circumstances*

**(9) Not doubling the last consonant in words when vowel endings are added** such as *puting*, *funy* and *begining* instead of *putting*, *funny* and *beginning*, respectively.

It might be that this rule has not properly or effectively taught, because fourth year students still have the same errors.

**(10) Miscellaneous** such as *terriblly*, *pennieless*, *fragnants* instead of *terribly*, *penniless* and *fragments*, respectively.

#### **Fourth Year**

The spelling mistakes of the fourth year students can be classified as follows:

**(1) Dropping/ adding final ‘e’** as in words *lovable*, *severly*, *blinde* instead of *loveable*, *severely* and *blind* respectively

This case of errors might be due to the complexity of the English spelling system. In the case of ‘lovable’ and *severly*, ‘e’ is dropped perhaps, it seems to me, because the student might over-generalise the rules where ‘e’ is dropped either when suffixes having a vowel start are added to words ending in ‘e’ as in ‘rule’: ‘ruling’ or when ‘-ly’ is added as in ‘gentle’: ‘gently’. Similarly, in the case of ‘blinde’, the student might add ‘e’ by analogy to words such ‘write’ and ‘white’ where the letter ‘i’ is pronounced long as /ai/ in words that end in ‘e’.

**(2) e/i confusion** as in *devine*, *envent* instead of *divine* and *invent* (see the same category above in first year)

**(3) Keeping the ‘LL’ in ‘Full’** as in *helpfull* and *wonderfull* instead of *helpful* and *wonderful* (see above in first year)

**(4) S/ C confusion** as *hypocricy* instead of *hypocrisy*

**(5) Over-generalisation of Plural** as in *heros* instead of *heroes*

This can barely be considered as a category because ‘heroes’ is an exceptional form of plural; only a few words in English which end in ‘-o’ have ‘es’ in place of ‘s’ in their plural forms, according to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:84). Further, some native speakers, even, might make spelling mistakes in these words.

**(6) Not Doubling the last consonant when ‘-ing’ or ‘-ed’ endings are added** as in *puting* and *prefered* instead of *putting* and *preferred* (see above in first year)

**(7) Miscellaneous** as *existance* instead of *existence*, *realy* instead of *really*

In comparing and commenting on the categories of spelling mistakes made by both groups of students, three points can be mentioned. First, four categories of spelling mistakes, as shown above, are found in common between students in first and fourth year. These are: (1) dropping or adding final ‘e’, (2) over-generalisation, (3) not doubling the last consonant and (4) s/c confusion. These categories seem not to be influenced by more exposure to the language learning.

Secondly, some of the categories of spelling mistakes, made by students in first and fourth year, such as ve/fe, g/c and s/c confusions can be related to the mother tongue influence. In Arabic, unlike English, /f/ and /v/ are not distinctive phonemes. In Syrian Arabic we find only /f/ which is represented in Arabic script as [ ف ]. Hence students sometimes have problems with the pronunciation of /v/ in English and tend to transfer this confusion to the spelling system, writing ‘v’ for ‘f’ and ‘f’ for ‘v’. Similarly, the classical or standard Arabic does not have the phoneme /g/ (unlike the colloquial Arabic), which accounts for students confusing /g/ and /c/ in the consonant cluster /gr/. The ‘s’/‘c’ confusion for the sound /s/ has slightly different origins. Arabic has the sound /s/, which is written as [ س ], but English has two letters of the alphabet which can represent /s/ both ‘s’ and ‘c’. Thus it is not surprising if the Arab students make mistakes with these letters.

The reasons behind such mistakes, I suggest, are either that these categories of error have not received proper emphasis in the syllabus or that they are not being taught effectively.

Thirdly, two categories of the errors made in the first year have disappeared from the writing of the fourth year; these are regular/ irregular verbs and the 'y' case when suffixes are added to it. This is an obvious indication of improvement in the students spelling which can be accounted to more exposure to the language learning. In terms of percentages, the means for both years are 1.40% and 0.43% respectively, which is not a high percentage taking into account that the writing analysed was produced under exam conditions by students who are non-native speakers. Moreover, Arabic orthographic system is completely different from English, which makes English spelling more difficult for the learners. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the spelling of students could be further improved with a relatively small amount of consistent teaching. Suggestions for special care with spelling are made in Chapter 9.

#### **5.4.2 Comparison with other studies**

Before concluding this section it might be of particular interest to make a comparison between the current study with Ibraim's (1977) and Haggan's (1991) studies in terms of spelling mistakes. The following points can be mentioned:

##### **A) Points of similarity**

1. All studies are concerned with spelling mistakes in written texts.
2. All the subjects are from ESL contexts in the Arab world.
3. All writers are students majoring English.

##### **B) Points of difference**

1. Neither Ibrahim or Haggan give the source of their data. It is not clear from the report whether they consider all the errors made by students or whether they have selected common or typical errors for discussion. In the present study a special corpus was analysed (see Chapter 2).

2. The length of the corpus in Ibrahim's and Haggan's studies is not mentioned, while it is mentioned in the current thesis. This might indicate an idea about to what an extent results can be generalised.
3. A complete list of these spelling mistakes (with their correct forms) is only provided by the study reported in the current thesis (see Appendix 5) , while such a list is missing in the other two studies.
4. In Ibrahim's study, in addition to examination scripts, the data came from homework assignments, papers and reports which might affect the results and in the long run limit its findings because using references and dictionaries is allowed; it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between which spelling mistakes were made at home or in the exam. Whereas in Haggan's and the current study, the data came from writing only under examination conditions where using references and dictionaries is not allowed; in the latter case the results give a more genuine and representative picture and in the long run chances of generalisation are wider.
5. The number of spelling mistakes made by students is only mentioned by both Haggan and the study reported in the current thesis, while it is missing in Ibrahim's. A possible explanation for this might be due to the fact that the two former studies are interested in comparing the spelling mistakes made by both groups of first and fourth year students in each study, while in the third, the main interest was just accounting for the underlying reasons behind these spelling mistakes. Thus giving the number of spelling mistakes might indicate something about the percentages of these mistakes.
6. The way these spelling mistakes are categorised is different in the three studies. In Ibrahim's study 7 categories are used; in Haggan's 8 categories are used with detailed sub-categories within each, while in the study reported in the current thesis 10 categories are identified for first year students and 7 categories for fourth year students, indicating a reduction in error types.



7. The subjects in the three studies differ though all of them are majoring English. In Ibrahim's, it is just mentioned that they were undergraduate students, but we do not know whether they are at the same or different stage of learning and we do not have any idea about development or improvement; in Haggan's and the study reported in the current thesis, the subjects were different groups of first and fourth years students.

However, in Haggan's study the number of students was different in each group. Only in the present study were the identical students used as subjects allowing the direct comparison of spelling at different stages. This is an important justification for carrying out this study because students' educational background and linguistic abilities are among the factors which play a certain role in affecting results and in the long run limiting findings and conclusions. For instance, when the subjects are not the same there is a chance that the students from either group might have come from different educational institutes or have changed their colleges or even have come from abroad having totally different learning and teaching experiences. But when the subjects are the same, as is the case of the current research, such extrinsic factors are missing which in the long run increases the reliability and credibility of this study. Further, this is an aspect of the originality of the current research.

In concluding this section, I might say that having complete mastery of the spelling system of a language is not easy to achieve, in particular if this system, English in this case, is complex and the outcome of many influences. This difficulty is increased in the case of learners whose first language does not use the roman alphabet, Arabic in this case. Nevertheless, higher degrees of accurate spelling can be obtained by paying careful attention to the subjects and by longer exposure to language learning, as shown in this study where the spelling mistakes made by fourth year students were considerably lower than the number made by the same students four years previously.

### **5.5 The use of Passive voice and third person pronouns**

In the coming section, I compare students' written texts from both groups in terms of the passive, third person pronoun and hedging, which are discussed separately in turn.

It is believed that the use of passive constructions is acquired at a later stage of learning because it is more complex than the active voice. To put differently, the use of passive is more associated with advanced learners. Thus if we compare the essays of both groups of students in the current study in terms of the passives to see whether fourth year students have the tendency of using this variable more than first year students or not, we get the following results, as shown in the table below. The total number of finite verbs in the text was considered (100%). The percentage of passive voice verbs is given below:

**Table 5.5: Percentages of the passive voice in students' texts**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Increase/Decrease</b>
1	6%	8%	+2%
2	33%	0	-33%
3	0	22%	+22%
4	0	15%	+15%
5	16%	36%	+20%
6	0	22%	+22%
7	40%	0	-40%
8	0	15%	+15%
9	37%	35%	-2%
10	0	34%	+34%
11	6%	11	+5%
12	6%	10%	+4%
13	9%	25%	+16%
14	11%	16%	+5%
15	0	36%	+36%
16	11%	8%	-3%
17	23%	9%	-14%
18	8%	14%	+6%
19	0	5%	+5%
20	0	9%	+9%
21	8%	10%	+2%
22	0	11%	+11%
23	0	33%	+33%
24	4%	23%	+19%
25	0	19%	+19%
26	36%	5%	-31%
27	22%	45%	+23%
28	0	-	=
29	18%	14%	-4%
30	20%	18%	-2%
<b>Mean</b>	<b>10.46%</b>	<b>16.93%</b>	<b>+6.47%</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>12.64%</b>	<b>11.99%</b>	<b>0.65%</b>

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 1.92; df: 29

P-value= 0.064, which is not significant at 0.05 level.

As the figures in the table above show, we see that 21 students (70%) increased their use of the passive, which is a reasonable percentage, while they were in the final stages of their study. Further, 11 students out of 21 who did not use passive in their texts when they were in first year of their study became aware of and used passive in

their texts while they were in final stages of their learning. This indicates that longer exposure to language learning makes students more confident about using the passive. 8 students(26.6%) decreased their use of the passive. This may be because the nature of the topics required students to use more active constructions than passives.

Another text variable to compare students' texts in both groups is the use of *third person pronouns* which has been reported to be used more frequently by advanced learners. Thus if we compare students' texts in both groups in terms of *third person pronoun*, we get the following results shown in table 5.5 below:

**Table 5.6: The use of third person pronoun in students' essays**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Increase/Decrease</b>
1	9	35	+26
2	9	34	+25
3	6	43	+37
4	4	26	+22
5	5	17	+12
6	10	18	+8
7	11	33	+22
8	6	37	+31
9	8	26	+18
10	13	37	+24
11	21	26	+5
12	17	40	+23
13	36	19	-17
14	14	29	+15
15	13	10	-3
16	4	33	+29
17	11	15	+4
18	26	16	-10
19	14	35	+21
20	28	30	+2
21	44	43	-1
22	14	42	+28
23	30	59	+29
24	28	42	+14
25	35	59	+24
26	18	19	+1
27	23	31	+8
28	12	20	+8
29	8	32	+24
30	23	32	+9
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>938</b>	<b>+438</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>+14.6</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>+3.4%</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>10.52</b>	<b>11.85</b>	<b>1.33</b>

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 6.11; df: 29

P-value= 0.001, which is highly significant at 0.01 level.

As the figures in the table above show, we notice that 26 students (86.6%) out of 30 increased their use of third person pronoun, which is a high percentage, while only 4

(13.3%) decreased their use of third person pronoun. Further, there is a considerable increase in both the overall mean and the percentage. This might indicate something about the students' ability to decentralise, which is a sign of maturity in writing, but could also be linked to the topic choice.

Nevertheless, the results in the table above give support to earlier research relative to the positive correlation between the frequent use of third person pronouns and more advanced learners' writing.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In concluding this section, I might say that co-ordinating conjuncts 'and' and 'but' were of high frequency in this data. This finding is in conformity with other studies carried out by some researchers such as Thompson-panos and Ruzic (1983) and Abuhamdia (1995) who pointed out the overuse of co-ordination by Arabic Learners. Further, the high frequency of co-ordination in this data might have been influenced by the excessive use of co-ordination that typifies Arabic when compared to other languages. Nevertheless, co-ordination is more universal than culturally specific, as Abuhamdia (1995) has successfully argued.

Concerning the use of relative pronouns, the analysis has shown that students in both years (with higher percentages in year 4) used them more than they did with the other conjuncts discussed above.

In terms of spelling, since the students are majoring English, they should have fewer spelling mistakes and special care should be given to spelling.

Regarding the use of passive and third person pronouns, the analysis has indicated that four students used these two variables more frequently than first year students, giving support to the findings reported by other researchers: More advanced learners are more likely to use (in addition to other text variables) third person pronouns and the passive.

## **CHAPTER SIX: Lexical Analysis**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The aim of this section is to identify any development that has taken place in the use of lexis by the students between year 1 and year 4.

Nation (1990) has discussed some issues which should be taken into account when teaching vocabulary such as: (1) the type of vocabulary learners need to know and (2) the way they learn this vocabulary. In attempting to answer the two points mentioned above, Nation classifies vocabulary into 4 categories: (1) high frequency words (2000 words), (2) academic vocabulary (800 words), (3) technical vocabulary (2000 words) and (4) low frequency words (123, 200 words). Thus depending on learners' aim, teachers can choose the most suitable word list. If their aim is to cover the four language skills, then a 'multi-purpose' list like the General Service List could be a suitable one, but if their aim is to read for a university degree, then the university word list would be a more suitable one. Further, in preparing a word list for learners of English, Nation suggests that the following criteria should be taken into account: (1) frequency, (2) range, (3) language needs, (4) availability and familiarity, (5) coverage, (6) regularity and (7) ease of learning. Moreover, Nation makes a distinction between receptive and productive learning. Receptive learning involves the recognition of a word and recall of its meaning. Productive learning involves in addition to receptive learning, the ability to use that word appropriately. There are various strategies that learners can follow in learning new vocabulary. For instance, 'guessing' from the context, Nation suggests, is one of the most useful strategies for the unknown words.

Nation makes another distinction between increasing vocabulary and establishing vocabulary. The former means introducing learners to new words, the latter means building up on previous knowledge by encouraging the knowledge of certain words to develop and expand. For instance, teachers can increase their learners' vocabulary by giving them lists of words. This knowledge could be established by either asking learners to read texts that contain words previously studied from lists or this knowledge can be established through games and puzzles that contain these words.

Actually, it is not easy to measure the development of students' vocabulary because there are, according to Laufer and Nation (1995), many factors other than language skill such as the topic and the communicative purpose of the text that affect lexical richness in students' writing.

A number of measures of vocabulary size has been proposed by Laufer and Nation (1995) in addition to a simple count of number of words used. In this chapter I report on *lexical density*, *lexical variation* and *lexical frequency*.

*Lexical variation*, in brief, is the name given to the ratio of type words to token words, and lexical density is the name given to the ratio of content words to function words. These two measures are explained in further detail in the coming sections. Both of these measures, although objective, present some problems in measuring the richness or size of students' vocabulary. The former is to a great extent influenced by the length of texts analysed, while the latter is affected by the use of cohesive devices.

A more valid and reliable measure of vocabulary richness is suggested by Laufer and Nation (1995: 311). They termed this index as the *lexical frequency profile*. It means 'the percentage of words a learner uses at different vocabulary frequency levels in her writing, - or, to put it differently, the relative proportion of words from different frequency levels'. Further, they suggest two measures, one for less advanced learners and the second for advanced learners. In the former, the comparison is made between the first 1000 most frequent words, the second 1000 and any other vocabulary used by the writer. In the latter, the distinction is made between the second 1000 most frequent words, the University Word List, and the less frequent words used by the writer (that is words that are not found in any of the above two lists). Thus, the measure focuses on the words used which are not in either of the two word lists mentioned above.

The lexical frequency profile has many advantages over the other lexical measures. For example, unlike lexical originality, it is more objective because it is not affected



by the group of learners. Moreover, unlike lexical density, the lexical frequency profile is totally independent of syntax and text devices (Laufer and Nation 1995).

In the present research the analysis involves the use of three lexical measures applied to the students' written texts: lexical variation, lexical density and a comparison of their lexical use with some word lists to attempt a lexical frequency profile.

## 6.2 Lexical measures

Before comparing the word types used by the two levels of students, it is necessary to give information about type/token distinction, depending on the definition of a word. A word, in The Concise Oxford Dictionary, is defined as 'a sound or combination of sounds forming a meaningful element of speech, usually shown with a space on either side of it when written or printed, used as part of a sentence'.

According to this definition, the following example (taken from students' writing whose results are reported in the thesis of the current research) contains six words:

*I became more and more worried*

The six words in the above example are usually known as word tokens. But this definition of word tokens has the problem of not distinguishing whether a learner is using the same or different words or words belonging to the same family. Therefore another definition is needed to allow for a such distinction between words, and allow us to count the number of *different* words (or word types). The word type, according to Faerch and others (1984: 78), can be defined as 'a sequence of letters bounded on either side by a space, and which (1) has a meaning that differs from other word tokens and/or (2) has a form, orthographic or phonological, different from other word tokens'. Thus the above example, according to word types, would contain five words instead of six because *more* is used twice. Moreover, words with the same root but with different inflections, according to word types definition, would be considered tokens of the same word type. As an illustration, we consider the following example taken from students' writing:

He *wants* to cut his beloved or wife according to his own classical moral codes and strict rules of morality. He does not *want* his beloved to praise him with a quality which does not really exist in him, because according to him this is hypocrisy.

The two words in italics above are counted two word tokens, but only one word type. Thus *want* and *wants* would be considered to be two token words of the same word type. The above text contains 46 word tokens and 32 word types. A measure of 1 (one) means that every word in the text is a different lexical item. If we compare types and tokens for the above text, we will get 0.69 (by dividing 32 types by 46 tokens), showing that some words are used more than once. Therefore great care should be taken when measuring the lexical variation of any written text.

### **6.2.1 Lexical variation**

Thus in measuring the lexical variation of students' texts produced by both groups of students, I follow the word types definition explained above.

When comparing the word types used in the students' essays of both groups, we get the following results shown in Table 6.1 below:

**Table 6.1 : Word Types used in the essays of students**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Increase/Decrease</b>
1	114	238	+124
2	90	216	+126
3	165	270	+105
4	120	165	+45
5	67	175	+108
6	98	155	+57
7	118	168	+50
8	119	120	+1
9	134	139	+5
10	107	219	+112
11	131	145	+14
12	120	174	+54
13	139	103	-36
14	123	134	+11
15	185	111	-74
16	139	155	+16
17	162	98	-64
18	172	132	-40
19	98	147	+49
20	184	153	-31
21	199	177	-22
22	112	157	+45
23	122	197	+75
24	182	140	-42
25	198	259	+61
26	138	180	+42
27	126	136	+10
28	125	115	-10
29	109	118	+9
30	172	135	-37
<b>Total</b>	<b>4068</b>	<b>4831</b>	<b>+763</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>135.6</b>	<b>161.03</b>	<b>+25.43</b>
<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>33.67</b>	<b>43.95</b>	<b>10.28</b>

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 2.48; df: 29

P-value= 0.019, which is significant at 0.05 level.

As the results in the table above show, we find that 21 students (70%) showed an average increase in their use of word types, while 9 students (30%) showed an average decrease in their use of word types. A possible statistical explanation for this

decrease is that the texts of fourth year students in most cases were longer than the texts of first year students, and in the long run they have more word types. The highest increase is 126 types while the highest decrease is 74 types. The average increase for the group is 25.43 types. This increase might not be high, but it shows an aspect of development and improvement on the part of fourth year students.

Moreover, if we compare the type/token ratio used by both groups of students, we get the following results shown in table 6.2 below:

**Table 6.2: Type/Token ratio in the students' essays of both years**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Increase/Decrease</b>
1	0.69	0.53	-0.16
2	0.55	0.44	-0.11
3	0.49	0.50	+0.01
4	0.64	0.51	-0.13
5	0.69	0.60	-0.09
6	0.63	0.51	-0.12
7	0.59	0.48	-0.11
8	0.56	0.47	-0.09
9	0.50	0.60	+0.10
10	0.59	0.49	-0.10
11	0.52	0.49	-0.03
12	0.57	0.57	=
13	0.53	0.58	+0.05
14	0.49	0.60	+0.11
15	0.51	0.69	+0.18
16	0.50	0.52	+0.02
17	0.59	0.64	+0.05
18	0.55	0.57	+0.02
19	0.54	0.42	-0.12
20	0.50	0.44	-0.06
21	0.46	0.48	+0.02
22	0.65	0.51	-0.14
23	0.48	0.43	-0.05
24	0.51	0.47	-0.04
25	0.49	0.50	+0.01
26	0.59	0.57	-0.02
27	0.54	0.56	+0.02
28	0.47	0.64	+0.17
29	0.50	0.52	+0.02
30	0.60	0.51	-0.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>16.52</b>	<b>15.84</b>	<b>-0.68</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>0.52</b>	<b>-0.03</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>0.063</b>	<b>0.066</b>	<b>0.003</b>

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 1.38; df: 29

P-value= 0.17, which is not significant at 0.05 level.

As the figures in the table above show, we find that 16 students (53.3%) decreased their ratio type/token words, 13 students (43.3%) increased this ratio and 1 student (3.3%) kept his ratio of word types/tokens the same as his equivalent in first year.

These results indicate that more than fifty percent of students decreased their ratio of word types/tokens, indicating more repetition of certain words in their essays. Two possible reasons can be given for these results, I suggest here. Faerch and others (1984) have suggested, learners who write on one topic need fewer word types than those learners who write on more than one topic, but in this case each student wrote on one topic only. The likely explanation here is text lengths. We know that the type/token ratio measure is highly influenced by the length of texts, as suggested by Faerch and others (1984). Further, this has been confirmed quite recently by Malvern and Richards (1997), who noted:

Nonetheless, TTR [Type Token Ratio] is not a constant, but decreases with increasing size of token sample. The reason is straightforward - as the number of Tokens increases, the available pool of new Types diminishes and the more Tokens in any sample, the greater the probability of repetitions. In theory, a large enough sample would exhaust the speaker's (or writer's) repertoire of word Types, and thereafter the ratio would tend to zero.

These results appear as expected because the texts of fourth year students in most cases were longer and therefore their overall type/token ratio is lower than their equivalent texts of first year students. But in the cases where their texts are shorter, their type/token ratio is higher as is the case of 7 students out of the 13 students who increased their type/token ratio; the other 6 students wrote longer essays and nevertheless their type/token ratio is higher. A possible explanation for this increase is that these texts are just a little bit longer than those of first year students. In addition, the fourth year essay topics required the students to write about characters in literature and proper names account for a quite a lot of repetition in the texts.

Thus measuring the students' essays in terms of type/token ratio, we can conclude that the short texts tend to have a higher ratio of word types/tokens, as can be seen in the table above. Moreover, the first sentence of any text should have the highest type/token ratio; likewise, the last sentence of any text tends to have a low type/token ratio. The reason for this is that the first sentence has more new words when compared with the last sentence, where there is the chance of using or repeating words already used in the text.

To examine further how the two groups of students differ and to get more valid and reliable results, texts of the same length from both groups of students should be measured. Therefore I suggest that the first 100 words of texts produced by both groups of students can be measured to see the differences in the type/token ratio. For example, I measured the 100 words of the first five students of both groups of students and the results are given in table 6.3 below:

**Table 6.3: Type/token ratio measured in the first 100 words for the first five students in both years**

No. of Scripts	Year 1	Year 4	Increase/Decrease
1	0.74	0.80	+0.06
2	0.62	0.66	+0.04
3	0.60	0.76	+0.16
4	0.68	0.76	+0.08
5	0.72	0.83	+0.11
<b>Mean</b>	0.67	0.76	+0.09
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	0.060	0.064	0.004

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 4.29; df: 4

P-value: 0.013, which is highly significant at 0.01 level.

As the figures in the table above show, we see that all students (100%) increased their type/token ratio, both individually and in the overall average for the group. This indicates that fourth year students used more varied type words than the first year students, which is an aspect of improvement. Further, if we measure the first 100 words of texts for the remainder of the of students, we get more or less similar results supporting the previous conclusion, namely fourth year students tend to use more varied type words than first year students do.

### **6.2.2 Lexical density**

*Lexical density*, in definition, is the proportion of **content words** in a written text such as verbs and nouns, which are from an open class, to the **function words** such as articles and conjunctions, which are from a closed class. Thus it is widely believed

that a text is dense if it has many content words because these words convey meaning.

As an illustration, let us consider the following example, taken from students' texts:

Finally, we see that the mind is very important thing for man, and without it we live wasting our time aimlessly, and we must strengthen our minds by knowledge.

The text contains 16 content words out of the total of 29 token words. If we divide 16 by 29, we get the lexical density, which is 0.55.

Unlike the previous measure, lexical variation, lexical density is not influenced by the length of text. Therefore, it is quite possible to compare texts of different lengths in terms of lexical density. But it is recommended to use texts of reasonable length which give more reliable figures.

Lexical density can be increased in a number of ways as Faerch and others (1984) have suggested. For instance, they mention certain features that native speakers writing in English use which increase the lexical density of the text (the examples below are taken from students' essays): modification of noun by means of adjectives used attributively (*the bold tenacious Odysseus*), adverbial modification (his bicycle was *sorrowfully* destroyed), and omission of pronouns (he refuses to bathe himself in front of them *and asks* them to go away). Further, the choice of sentence pattern influences the lexical density. There is one more closed class item in *This brings me to the words of Nestor* than in the syntactic structure actually used by a fourth year student, *This brings me to Nestor's words*. The argument the authors want to make is that lexical density can be used to measure the syntactic complexity of a written text in addition to measuring richness of lexis.

When comparing the students' texts of both groups in terms of *lexical density*, we get the following results shown in table 6.4 below:



**Table 6.4: Lexical density in the students' essays of both years**

<b>No. of Scripts</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Increase/Decrease</b>
1	0.43	0.45	+0.02
2	0.42	0.43	+0.01
3	0.42	0.46	+0.04
4	0.45	0.53	+0.08
5	0.55	0.51	-0.04
6	0.48	0.50	+0.02
7	0.41	0.52	+0.11
8	0.44	0.46	+0.02
9	0.48	0.50	+0.02
10	0.43	0.49	+0.06
11	0.42	0.48	+0.06
12	0.53	0.53	=
13	0.45	0.53	+0.08
14	0.43	0.46	+0.03
15	0.45	0.52	+0.07
16	0.49	0.50	+0.01
17	0.47	0.52	+0.05
18	0.49	0.50	+0.01
19	0.41	0.48	+0.07
20	0.44	0.50	+0.06
21	0.44	0.50	+0.06
22	0.55	0.44	-0.11
23	0.44	0.46	+0.02
24	0.46	0.44	-0.02
25	0.48	0.47	-0.01
26	0.44	0.53	+0.09
27	0.45	0.44	-0.01
28	0.39	0.53	+0.14
29	0.42	0.48	+0.06
30	0.46	0.45	-0.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>+9</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>+0.03</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>0.039</b>	<b>0.032</b>	<b>0.007</b>

Type of test used: t-test

T-value: 3.69; df: 29

P-value= 0.001, which is highly significant at 0.01 level.

As the results in the table above show, we find that 23 students (76.6%) increased their lexical density, 6 students (20%) decreased their lexical density and 1 student (3.3%) kept the same lexical density as in first year.

In general, the fourth year students' texts are higher in lexical density than first year students' texts, though the difference on average is not big. However, figures are usually quite small in lexical density comparisons.

Of particular interest is to compare the lexical density of students' writing reported in the present thesis with that of 30 different written texts reported by Ure (1971), who examined the relation between a 'situational classification of texts according to language use, and a classification according to language patterning: that is to say, a study of register' (p.450). Ure demonstrated that the lexical density of spoken English ranged from 23.9 to 43.2. Her figures for written English are shown in table 6.5 below:

**Table 6.5: Comparison of lexical density of different written texts**

Type of texts	No. of words	Lexical density
Essays written by year 1 students	7599	45
Essays written by year 4	9423	48
'What shall I do?'- letters and answers from women's papers	1737	35.8
'brave little tailor'-story from <i>Colour Book</i>	403	38.8
Comic strip: 'Flook'- three serial stories	3130	40.4
'Brave little tailor'- story from miniature book	738	40.6
School essays	713	40.6
'Brave little tailor'- story from anthology	2039	40.9
'Replanting the tree'- extract from story by Tolkein	107	41.1
'Silly Jack'- folklore commentary by Stith Thompson	304	42.1
'Brave little tailor'-story from <i>Golden Book</i>	860	42.2
'Brave little tailor'- commentary by Stith Thompson	774	42.4
'The fierce bad rabbit', and 'The story of Miss Moppet', stories of theft and escape from capture by Beatrix Potter	368	43.7
'The dog and Mr Morency'- story by H. E. Bates	2014	44.2
'Tales of luck'- folklore commentary by Stith Thompson	440	44.5
Football report from daily paper	374	44.6
'Brave little tailor'- story from <i>Treasury</i>	2225	44.8
'Theft'- from manual <i>Teach Yourself the Law</i>	323	44.8
Requests and demands- a set of business letters	348	46.8
'Macomber hunting'- extract from story by	478	47

Hemingway		
'Planting and soul'- from manual <i>Teach Yourself Gardening</i>	1157	47.1
'Random samples' from manual <i>Lady Luck</i> by W. Weaver	419	47.2
'Drunk on railway line'- report from evening paper	135	48.1
'Arabs hunting'- report from <i>Guardian</i> newspaper	210	48.4
'A juvenile theft'- report from evening paper	143	49.6
'Machines that work for men'- from school textbook	1091	50.2
'Pan-African'- report from <i>Express</i> newspaper	88	51.1
'Make your own mobile'- instructions with child's toy	160	51.2
'Rabbit pie' and three other rabbit recipes	423	51.3
'Alcoholism'- publisher's blurb	121	52
'Cognitive style'- from scientific work by D. Lawton	1000	52.8
'Pan-African'- report from <i>Times</i> newspaper	111	56.8

As the figures show in table 6.5, we see that the lexical density of students' writing in year 1 is the equivalent of that of 'Brave little tailor' and 'Theft'. By year 4, the lexical density has increased to the level of 'Drunk on a railway line' and 'Arabs hunting', both newspapers reports, in the highest quarter of Ure's corpus of native speaker writers. This confirms the progress made by the students.

### 6.2.3 Lexical frequency profile

To get a better idea about the size of vocabulary used by both groups of students, we need to compare the words they use with other word lists considered as standard. Here, I take three standard word lists: The General Service List (see West 1953), Words from the General Service List "which are not likely to be well known" and the University Word List (see Nation and Kyongho 1995). The first comprises approximately 2000 words, the second contains 195 words whereas the third consists of 800 words. When comparing the word lists of the data of this study reported in the current thesis with other word lists such as the General Service list and a University Word List, we get the following figures shown in table 6.5:

**Table 6.6: Number of students' writing words found in some word lists**

Word List	Total No. of types used in essays of Year 1	Total No. of types used in essays of Year 4
General Service List (1805 words)	835	720
Words from the General Service List not likely to be well known (195 words)	29	41
A University Word List (800 words)	66	117
Words which are not found in any word list mentioned above	145	259
Total	1075	1137

[Note: The General Service List consists of 2000 words. The first category in the table has 2000 words Minus those categorized by Nation and Kyangho as 'not likely to be well known'.]

In general, as the figures in the table above show, we see that the vocabulary size for the fourth year students is wider than that of the first year students. This might reflect the influence of the reading in literature and criticism in the final year of the degree course.

Further analysis can be made to show the percentages of words used by both groups of students that is found in each word list. The results are given in the table below:

**Table 6.7: Percentages of words used by students in each word list category (all figures are approximate)**

Word List	Year 1	Year 4
General Service List	77.8%	63.3%
Words from the General Service List which are not likely to be well known	2.6%	3.6%
A University Word List	6.1%	10.2%
Words not found in any word lists mentioned above	13.4%	22.7%

As the figures show in the table above, a large proportion of their vocabulary belongs to the General Service List indicating their use of high frequency vocabulary. But when comparing the two groups, we find that first year students used a little bit over three quarters of their vocabulary from the General Service List, while fourth year students used less than two thirds of their vocabulary from the same word list. The situation becomes different regarding the University List: More fourth year students

used words from University List than first year students did. This indicates an increase in their vocabulary range (though this could be after explanations, such as topic). Similarly, the number of words which are not found in either word lists demonstrates that fourth year students had a wider range of vocabulary than first year students and a somewhat untypical command of vocabulary. This list of words shows the influence of the degree course content (See Appendix 6 for a full list).

Some of the words have clearly been learned from the literary texts given for reading purposes. For example, we find:

brandish	cavern	cunning
debris	follies	luxurious
misanthropist	mitigate	mortal

Others, however, have more general application and might be expected to appear in a longer university word list than the one given by Nation (1990):

ability	comparison	conception
concerning	convention	essence
differentiate	inconsistency	inexperienced

Another analysis can be added here to show the percentages of words from the previous word list appearing in the students' essays of both groups, which is given in the table below:

**Table 6.8: Percentages of words from standard lists appearing in the essays**

Word List	Year 1	Year 4
General Service List	46.2%	39.8%
Words from the General Service List not likely to be well known	14.8%	21.1%
A University List	8.2%	14.6%

The results in table above confirm earlier findings relative to the limited range of students' vocabulary.

### 6.3 Text variables in writing produced by students at different levels

In analysing the data of 160 ESL learner essays which come from four L1 groups: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, Ferris (1994) identified some syntactic and lexical text features which were used more frequently by students of higher L2 proficiency than those of lower levels of L2 proficiency. These features were 28 in number, but 18 of these variables demonstrated significant differences between the two groups of learners. Such variables were Number of words, Stative forms, Passives and Participials (for a complete list of these text variables see 3.2 and Ferris 1994: 415-417). Further, many of these same features were considerably related to the holistic ratings given to the essays by three independent teachers.

A text variable used to compare students' texts at both levels is the use of 'special lexical classes' such as '*hedges*', which are found in literature positively correlated with advanced learners, as discussed by Ferris (1994). 'Hedging' is a rhetorical class since the term refers to the writer's intention to modify the proposition. It is possible to argue that some hedges are realized lexically and some grammatically. Modal verbs, for example, such as 'may' or 'might', are lexico-grammatical, and some hedges are stock phrases, such as 'according to' or 'in my opinion'. I have included this category in this chapter rather than Chapter Five as Ferris categorized them as lexical.

Actually, the analysis here revealed only six cases of using hedges by first year students, which is a very low rate. These cases were as follows (The intended examples are in italics):

- 'World *seemed to me* like a coffin'
- '*to my point of view...*' (sic)
- '*... seems to me*'
- '*I think* that... '
- '*From my point of view...* '
- 'Film *may be* considered as a book'

A possible explanation for the low use of hedging expression is that first year students are not aware of the function of this device, which is not given proper attention in the syllabus.

Fourth year students' writing, however, revealed much more significant use of hedging, in quantity and variation. In fact, there were 40 cases of the use of hedges; they are listed below: (The intended examples are in italics, and the number between brackets indicates the frequency of that expression):

- '... who *seems to be* very strict' (2)
- '*If I am allowed to* use... '
- '... while *others seem* in their... '
- 'This exaggeration by Homer *could be considered* as a defect in his style'
- 'Concerning Odysseus action *we may* analyse it on two levels: ...'
- 'To conclude, *I can* say...'
- 'Odysseus moral integrity appears *nearly every where*'
- 'Molier *seems to* dissect human psychology...'
- 'As a conclusion, *we can* say that...'
- '... *stands for as* the mouth piece of Molier'
- 'A lover *might* describe his ugly sweat hear as a beautiful lady'
- '*According to Eliante, ...*' (14)
- '*What can I* say ...'
- 'This fact *appears to be*...'
- 'Flattery which *seems to be* unreal'
- '*Acaste's point of view*...'
- '*In my opinion*...'
- '... *he appears as* a faithful lover'
- '*It appears to me*...'
- 'They *may* fall in love...'
- '*One of* Odysseus achievement... ' (2)
- '*One of* his moral integrities is... ' (3)

A likely explanation for the increase use of hedging is that fourth year students have become aware of these devices because of their longer exposure to the language, which indicates clearly an aspect of development and improvement. Further, these results give support and confirm previous research which reported that frequent usage of hedging is usually associated with advanced learners.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

In concluding this chapter, I might say that the analysis in this section which involved using several ways of measuring written texts produced by two groups of students has shown that longer exposure to language learning was reflected in students' writing ability in most cases. Such analysis involved the use of lexical variation and lexical density measures in addition to the word list measure. Another analysis involved the use of hedging.

In spite of the evidence for overall development in lexical use, it is clear from the results that a small minority of students have not made adequate progress in their control of vocabulary. This may be accounted for by low class attendance, lack of study (perhaps as a result of part-time jobs) or low language learning ability. Some ways in which this problem can be tackled are suggested in the final chapter of this thesis.



## **CHAPTER SEVEN: Subjective Evaluation**

### **7.1 Aim**

The current research is concerned with the improvement the students have made in their writing. The previous chapters, namely chapter four, chapter five and six are concerned with measurable and objective characteristics of students' writing. The main purpose of this chapter is to report on what native speaker teachers of English value in the text apart from the mechanics, and other areas that can be measured, because I am also interested to know whether the students have improved or not as far as their general writing ability is concerned. It has been widely recognised that there are factors in general language use that cannot easily be measured or tested. Carrol (1980: 8) writes 'The criterion for success lies not in formal correctness but in communicative effectiveness'. However, it is difficult to evaluate communicative effectiveness. It is this position that has led to the development of performance testing and, although this is not the topic of the present study, work in that area demonstrated that a piece of writing (like a conversation) is more than the sum of its parts. But the 'parts' themselves are complex and include not only such factors as length of sentences, grammatical forms and lexical frequency, but also pragmatic competence (including cultural appropriateness), sensitivity to register and style and strategic issues (for discussion see Bachman 1990: Chapter 4). It seemed to me that the best way to judge overall progress in communicative effectiveness was to ask native speaker teachers of English to evaluate the progress made by the students in their writing. The value of this type of subjective assessment is discussed by Carrol and Hall (1985). For example, in writing particularly, formal measurement cannot tell us anything about the writer's ability to relate ideas, organise material or make judgements about what to include in the essay. For the current research, I expected a broad subjective evaluation, focusing on less discrete matters, but as will be seen, most of the teachers chose to comment on factors that could be measured in some way.

Nevertheless, an overall picture did emerge indicating that the teachers recognised development in the writing ability. I report on this investigation below.

## **7.2 Procedure**

I designed a small project to be carried out by native speaker teachers of English. The sample consisted of five pairs of essays from the same corpus as the previous research and written by the same students, at different stages of their university learning. Actually, I would have liked the whole sample of this research, that is the 30 pairs of essays, to be evaluated by native speakers, but the problems of finding informants with sufficient time made this impossible. Therefore, it was decided to limit this sample to just five pairs of essays so that the risk of loading the native speakers with too much work was minimised. These pairs of essays were chosen randomly for no specific reason, that is the first five essays in order of the thirty students, from the complete data of the current research. These essays were coded with a number and a letter, signifying the student and the order in which the essays were written. For instance, the first pair was coded with 1A and 1B: the former means that the text was written at year 1 of university learning, and 1B means that the text written by the same student but at later stage of university learning, namely year 4. The same is applicable to the other pairs of essays. The subjects who participated in this project were 20 native speaker teachers of English. All of them had at least five years' experience of teaching English to foreign learners in the United Kingdom and overseas. These assessors were given a number each for easy reference. For the purpose of this research these native speakers will be called 'assessors'. The project required these assessors to answer (for each student) the following questions on sheets attached to each of the five pairs of essays given to them:

1. In what ways do you think that this student's writing has improved? Please mention any improvements you can see in the written work of this students.
2. Do you think that there are any aspects of writing in which the student has not improved?
3. Please make any comments you wish on the level of progress made by the student.

Moreover, the assessors were told that the current researcher was not only concerned with the development of grammatical accuracy; he was also interested in any aspects

of writing that they valued as a sign of progress. So they were requested to feel free to comment on any aspect of the writing they wished.

### **7.3. Assessors' report: Results**

In evaluating texts, the main purpose behind designing this project, assessors were given a free hand to carry out this task. The most striking thing in their assessment is their variability, which is to say that they pick on different aspects of the writing. Furthermore, even within the same assessor we notice inconsistency in the aspects on which s/he has commented. Although this was unexpected, it is, perhaps, not surprising when one considers the well known problem of rater-reliability in testing (as discussed by White 1985, for instance), which can be helped to a large extent by training assessors or raters but this is beyond the interest of the current research. Nevertheless, some of them were consistent and they had many points in common. The main points in the assessors' evaluation are summarised in section 7.3.1 and 7.3.2.

#### **7.3.1 Aspects of writing which had improved**

1. The assessors commented on a large number of improvements. These mainly concerned specific features of student writing, (for example: organization and range of vocabulary). The number of improvements mentioned are shown in the table 8.1 below:

**Table 7.1: Features of students' writing which had improved**

<b>Number of student</b>	<b>Features of writing which had improved</b>
1	20
2	18
3	22
4	21
5	17
Average	19.6

2. The most frequent aspects of writing improved in the five students' essays were as follows (number between brackets refers to their frequency): Organization (12), sentence structure (10), range of vocabulary (9), and use of cohesive devices (6). The

least frequent aspects mentioned were spelling (2), conventions of writing ( for example use of contractions) (2) and punctuation (4).

Examples of assessors' responses as regards the frequent features improved are given below:

*In terms of organization:*

- 'Much better organised - clear introduction and conclusion + use of paragraphs'.
- 'B [essay] is better developed and the paragraph appears to have a transparent organization'.
- 'In 2A the student uses no paragraphs, but the sense of paragraph seems well-developed in 2B. 2A has a basic narrative structure of sorts, but 2B has a fairly well-developed structure in which the themes of the paragraphs are clearly delineated: (1) a general introduction to Moliere's themes (2) an introduction to plot and the characters of Alceste (3) the character of Celimene. (4) Comment on the strengths of the play'.

Other assessors' responses are of a similar nature.

*In terms of sentence structure:*

- 'Vast improvements in sentence structure (earlier version [1A]: most structures were incomplete)'.
- 'In B: More complex sentences + good use of subordinate clauses'.
- 'The sentence structures are more complex. 1A has a number of one clause sentences which sound abrupt. 1B has many 3+4 clause sentences. The range of grammatical structures in 1B is wider with cleft sentences and embedded clauses'.

Other assessors' responses are more or less of a similar nature.

*In terms of range of vocabulary:*

- 'The student's writing has improved in a number of ways. In the first essay there are a lot of words used wrongly: ... *astonished*, *accure*, *anguishes*. In the second essay the student shows that s/he has developed a more extensive vocabulary and uses a wide range of words correctly (for example, *crucial*, *gallant*... *penetrate*, *vulnerable*,

*random, recklessness, inconsistency*) [the assessor's emphasis], which indicate a much better knowledge of the language'.

- 'Wider range of vocabulary demonstrated + Knowledge of collocation. Some effective imagery'.
- '... obviously vocabulary has developed massively'.

Other assessors' responses are of a similar nature.

*In terms of cohesive devices:*

- 'Student seems to be developing control over transitions and conjunctions- hence cohesion is improving' (the assessor's emphasis).
- 'Able to organise larger text- more cohesion devices used'.
- '... There is greater coherence of discussion in B, with clearer sentence structure and good use of connectives'.
- 'Use of discourse markers e.g. 'Further more', 'to conclude' etc. [sic]'.

Other assessors' responses are roughly of a similar nature.

3. The most frequently noted improvements for each student separately can be summarized as follows (number between brackets refers to their frequency as reported by assessors):

Student number 1: Sentence structure (10), range of vocabulary and use of cohesive devices (7), better use of collocation (6), and organization (3).

Student number 2: Range and use of vocabulary (8), organization (7), sentence structure (6) and use of cohesive devices (2).

Student number 3: Organization and use of tenses (7), the use of cohesive devices (6), range of vocabulary and punctuation (5), and sentence structure (4).

Student number 4: Organization (9), sentence structure (6), use of cohesive devices (5), style and use of vocabulary (3), and range of vocabulary (2).

Student number 5: Organization (12), sentence structure (8), use of vocabulary (6), range of vocabulary (4), and punctuation (3).

4. If one counts the 'improvements' mentioned by all assessors for each student, the results are as follows: student 1: 73 improvements, student 3: 66, student 5: 52,

student 2: 44, and student 4: 43. These totals include a number of repetitions, but are useful in indicating general observed improvements.

5. Assessors with the numbers, 2, 4 and 13 reported the largest number of improvements (29, 24 and 22 aspects respectively). Whereas assessors with the numbers 6, 10 and 12 reported the least number of improvements (9, 12 and 12 respectively).

6. There were only four assessors (with numbers 2, 7, 13 and 14) who were consistent in at least one aspect, which they picked up in their evaluation of all five students. These aspects were respectively as follows: organization, length of essay, sentence structure and range of vocabulary.

### **7.3.2 Aspects of writing which had not improved**

1) The overall number of aspects of writing which had not improved as reported by the assessors (for example: spelling and punctuation) are shown in the table 7.2 below:

**Table 7.2: Features of writing which had not improved**

<b>Number of Student</b>	<b>Features of writing which had NOT improved</b>
1	16
2	12
3	9
4	12
5	14
Average	12.6

The figures in the table above are misleading, however, as will be discussed in section 7.4 ( discussion of results) later in this chapter.

2) The most overall frequent aspects which had not improved for the five students' essays as a whole were as follows (number between brackets refers to their frequency):

Spelling (11), over-long sentences (9), punctuation (8), and tense confusion (7).

The fewest aspects which had not improved were as follows: Organization (2), the purpose of writing is not clear (2), and the use of articles (3).

Examples of assessors' responses relative to some aspects which had not improved can be given below:

- 'Still some spelling problems + punctuation mistakes'.
- 'Still problems with knowing when to end/form a sentence-they ramble on a bit'
- 'There is still a great deal that this student [2B] has still not mastered: the graphic form of the sentence and uses commas where full stops are needed'.
- 'Tenses are still doubtful'.

3. The most frequent writing aspects which were not seen to be improved for each student separately can be summarised as follows (number between brackets refers to their frequency):

Student number 1: Some inappropriate use of vocabulary (7), repetition (2), use of tenses (2), and archaic words (2).

Student number 2: Over-long sentences (12), Punctuation (8), lack of cohesive devices and problems with coherence (3), and lack of command of tense and aspect (2).

Student number 3: Spelling (6), use of tenses (5), punctuation (4), and lack of cohesive devices (3).

Student number 4: Problems with coherence (3), spelling (2), inappropriate use of some vocabulary (2), and use of tenses (2).

Student number 5: Spelling (9), punctuation (3), repetition (2), and the purpose of writing is not clear (2).

4. Overall, assessors' comments on lack of improvement were fewer than comments on features that had improved. The total results were as follows: student 4: 26, student 3: 30, student 1: 32, student 2: 33 and student 5: 34.

5. Assessors with the numbers 3, 6, and 10 reported the largest numbers of writing aspects which had not improved (14, 13, and 13 respectively). Whereas assessors

with the numbers 11, 5 and 7 reported the least number of aspects which had not improved (2, 7 and 9 respectively).

6. There was no common fault or error indicated by any assessor for each of the five students.

### **7.3.3 General comments on the students' progress**

As mentioned in the procedures of this project, the final question in the small project asked assessors to make any general comments on the students' progress. Their comments can be summarized as follows:

1. Three assessors (number 2, 8 and 13) reported on all five essays. Four assessors (number 4, 7, 11 and 14) reported on four essays. Three assessors (number 1, 6 and 9) reported on three essays. Two assessors (number 5 and 15) reported on two essays. One assessor (number 12) only reported on one essay. Two assessors (number 3 and 10) did not respond to the question at all.
2. One assessor (number 13) was very consistent in making the same type of comment on the five essays, namely the movement from level 2 to the level 3 according to the UCLES framework, which was attached with her comments. A copy of this frame is given in appendix 7. She found that all 5 students had progressed from level 2 to level 3.
3. The other frequent general comments concerned range of vocabulary, organization, the effect of literary sources (which caused the increase in vocabulary range), and that the writer was more effective in communicating the message.
4. Two assessors commented that the lexis used by fourth year students were 'archaic' and 'literary'. This might be due to the content of their essays which goes back to Greek mythology.



#### 7.4 Discussion of results

In the light of the assessors' responses mentioned in the three sections above, the results have shown instances of consistency and variability relative to their comments on the students' writing. The main points can be summarized as follows:

1. Though the assessors were told that this project was mainly concerned with the unmeasurable features of students' writing, the majority, if not all, of assessors' responses were heavily directed to measurable aspects of writing. For instance, the results indicated that range of vocabulary and sentence structure, which can be measured objectively, were among the most frequent features reported on by the majority of assessors. Other features such as the writer's style and the power of communicating the topic message, which are unmeasurable features, were unfortunately among the least frequently aspects mentioned in the assessors' comments. The reasons behind this, I suggest, are that the assessors were given a free hand to carry out their task, and commenting on the measurable characteristics of writing is more easily done than the unmeasurable ones. It may also reflect teachers' pre-occupations.
2. The figures shown in the table 7.2 as regards the features of writing which had not improved are high and misleading, as the figures may give the reader the impression that the improvement is slight. This can be explained, I suggest, by the fact that many assessors reported that certain features of writing had improved *in certain ways*. Then the same features were mentioned under the aspects which had *not* improved *in other ways* reported by the same assessors. For instance, assessor with number 2 commented that the 'organization' of an essay had improved by having an introduction and a conclusion, but when commenting on the aspects which had not improved, the same assessor mentioned that 'the organization of the paragraph is weak'. Another assessor number 4 commented that 'clarity of expression' had improved. Then concerning the features which had not improved, the same assessor reported that there was 'occasional obscurity'. Still another assessor number 15

mentioned that ‘the control of grammar was much better in the later essay [3B]’. Then the same assessor commented that ‘there were still a few grammatical errors’.

3. The assessors’ responses indicated that the assessors were not consistent in their comments on students’ writing. Some assessors reported improvements while other assessors reported that the same features had not improved. For example, one feature for each student can be mentioned, indicating the assessors’ inconsistency, as follows:

For student 1: Assessor number 9 reported that ‘spelling’ had improved, while the assessor number 3 mentioned that spelling had not improved.

For student 2: Assessor number 13 commented that ‘grammar is more accurate’, while assessor number 14 reported that ‘grammar is shaky’.

For student 3: Assessor number 7 mentioned that ‘the use of tenses’ had improved, while assessor number 5 reported that ‘tenses are still doubtful’.

For student 4: Assessor number 1 reported that the writer’s style was appropriate, while assessor number 3 considered the writer’s style to have regressed.

For student 5: Assessor number 8 mentioned that ‘punctuation’ had improved, while assessor number 9 included ‘punctuation’ to be among the features which had not improved.

A possible explanation for the inconsistency among assessors is, I suggest, the absence of a scoring guideline (which would have defeated the objective of the project) and the fact that the assessors had not been trained, both of which helps assessors reach higher degrees of conformity in their assessment of writing.

Nevertheless, there were many instances of conformity among assessors’ reports especially regarding the improvements in length, organisation and vocabulary.

4. In terms of improvement, the figures in the table 7.1 above indicate that student 3 made the most progress because he had the highest number of features that had improved, student 4 came second, student 1 third, student 2 fourth, and student 5 fifth and final. Whereas in terms of lack of improvement, the figures in the table 8. 2

above also indicate that student 3 comes first because he had the least number of features which had not improved, second students 2 and 3, third student 4, and fourth (final) student 1. Further, these results demonstrate and confirm the assessors' variability regarding their comments on the students' essays. The assessors' comments were not in harmony for four students. The only exception for this is student 3 where the assessors were consistent in rating him first in both the highest number of features that had improved and the lowest in terms of features that had not improved.

### **7.5 Conclusion**

In concluding this chapter I must say that it is arguable that this project tells us more about assessors' variability than it does about students' writing development. This variability might have been avoided if the assessors had been trained and provided with a set of criteria for comment, but this would have defeated the object of the exercise. The objective here was not to investigate marker variability but to find out whether experienced native speaker teachers recognised development in the students' writing ability. This small project has revealed quite clearly that the students' writing skill in the five essays written in level 2 improved in varying degrees when compared to their equivalent essays written in level 1. As noted by one assessor the five students have moved from level 2 to level 3 according to UCLES framework as far as their writing skills are concerned. A relevant matter is that only some of the data of the current research was seen by these assessors; other essays might have been seen to have reached a more advanced level of improvement according to the UCLES framework (that is to say level 4), for instance.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: Students' Perceptions and Attitudes to Writing**

This section is devoted to students' attitudes to their courses and to their own perception of their writing ability. A questionnaire and an interview were designed to gather data about students' attitudes. These data help to give a fuller picture of the students' linguistic and socio-cultural background. Their attitudes to writing may help us to understand more about their progress or lack of progress and also help in the future planning of writing courses.

First I present the findings of the questionnaire, referring, where relevant, to links between this information and to that of the linguistic analysis of students' exam scripts. This is followed by a discussion of the structured interviews that were held with a random sample of 10 students in their final stages of their university course.

### **8.1 Questionnaire**

A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 3. As mentioned in the data and methodology chapter, this questionnaire was given to the students in their final stages of study at the Department of English in Aleppo University. A hundred copies of this questionnaire were distributed to the students while they were in the classroom. The researcher was actually present among the students while they were filling in the questionnaire to explain any ambiguous items or to answer any queries about the questionnaire. Ninety copies were returned after they were completed by the students, and the other ten were taken away by the students, with an overall 90% of returns, which is a high percentage.

#### **8.1.1 Analysing questionnaire**

The questionnaire in form has three sections, comprising a total of 22 questions. These three sections cover the areas (1) personal information, (2) attitudes to writing (including their perceptions of progress in writing) and (3) feedback and reading.

Two questions are not considered in this report. First, question number 13, which is about whether the type of questions in the exam affect the quality of writing or

not, is not be considered in the analysis because it was misunderstood by the students.

Secondly, question 7, which is about the reasons for lack of improvement in their writing ability, is not be considered in the analysis because all students answered question No 6 (which is about the improvement of students' writing ability) with the positive view that their writing ability had improved. Question 7 required students to tick reasons for lack of improvement and so was not answered by students.

The questionnaire was administered in English. The possibility of giving the questionnaire in Arabic was considered, but, since all the students are English majors, it was decided to use English. The researcher was present while the questionnaire was filled in and he answered questions from the subjects.

It is worth noting here, I think, that this questionnaire has a limitation. Since the data of the research reported in previous chapters, namely the exam scripts which took place in the academic years 1989-1992, were collected in Autumn 1994, the researcher of this study could not use the same subjects in this questionnaire as those whose exam scripts were analysed because obviously the students were not available at the time of collecting this data. This constraint can be taken into account in future studies.

- Section one aimed at establishing certain facts about students' educational background. It consists of 4 questions relating to multi-lingualism, which are discussed in turn. Some of these questions have follow-up questions.

Question 1 is about the students' knowledge of the following languages: Arabic, English, French with respect to the four skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening. The students' answers are given in Table 8.1:

**Table 8.1: Students' knowledge of three languages**

Languages	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening
Arabic	90	90	90	90
English	90	90	90	90
French	8	20	16	14

As the results show in table 8.1 all the students indicated a knowledge of Arabic and English and a command of all four skills. It seemed important to establish whether or not all students were at least bilingual. I also wished to establish in which languages students felt most confident. With respect to French, the picture is totally different: 20 students (the highest) and 8 students (the lowest) indicated a knowledge of the four skills of this language. The reason behind this low percentage might be due to the fact that French is a second language and one choice among other European languages taught in the Department of English.

Students were also asked to write in information about any other languages known. Responses can be seen in Table 8.2:

**Table 8.2: Students' knowledge of other languages**

Language	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening
German	2	9	6	4
Russian	2	2	2	3
Dutch	3	5	3	3
Armenian	7	7	7	7
Turkish	6	5	4	7
Kurdish	4	1	1	3
Syriac	1	1	1	1

With respect to the first three languages mentioned in table 8.2 (German, Russian and Dutch), the reason for students' knowledge of these languages and other languages mentioned earlier might be, I suggest, the fact that one of the parents of a student, the mother in most cases, who is married to a Syrian, speaks one of these languages. This was confirmed by students' responses to item 2 in the questionnaire, where they admitted receiving help from their parents, 'conversation with my mother' being mentioned by some students. Whereas with the other four languages (Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish and Syriac), the situation is different: in

Syria there are minority communities whose native language is not Arabic; in this case the students and their parents are native speakers of these languages.

Question 2 is about whether students receive any help with English from their families.

The students' responses to this question can be summarized as follows:

73 students (81.11%) did not receive any help, while 17 students (18.88%) answered that they did. The type of help received by students were 'conversation with my mother', 'instruction and advice on studying', 'reading material' and 'the meaning of idioms and words'.

Two points can be added here. First, the low percentage of students who received some kind of help is not likely to affect the overall performance of the students. Secondly, none of the help received by students from their parents is directly related to writing and it is not likely to affect their writing ability.

Question 3 is about the reasons behind the students' choosing to study English. The responses may help us to understand the relative importance of writing skills to the students' personal objectives. The students' responses can be grouped as follows, arranged in order of popularity in Table 8.3:

**Table 8.3: Reasons for learning English**

Number of Cases	The reasons behind learning English
75	to be able to communicate easily with English speakers
41	to pursue their higher education in an English speaking country
40	to help them get a better job
27	to become a teacher of English
16 [written-in]	others such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to get a higher position in the society</li> <li>• to learn more about the English literature</li> <li>• I like studying languages especially English</li> <li>• to make myself unique somehow (sic)</li> <li>• to watch American movies</li> <li>• to be an English citizen</li> </ul>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• because I consider English is a period of amusement (sic)</li></ul> |
|--|---|

Samples only are given in Table 8.3 for the written-in responses. Others were of a similar nature.

As the results in table 8.3 show, it is noticeable that students are motivated instrumentally and integratively to learn English, though with higher rates for the latter type of motivation. But this may not reflect actual reality; most teachers believe that the students' main concern, of the majority at least, is passing the exam and getting a degree to get a better job.

Question 4 is about whether students have a part time job while they are studying in the university. The students' responses were as follows:

68 (75.5%) students answered 'No' and 22 (24.4%) 'Yes'. The jobs of those who answered 'Yes' were:

- Teacher of English in schools or private institutes
- Factory worker
- Cashier or accountant in a company
- Self-employed (trade or commerce)
- Waiter in a hotel
- Para-medical work

As the figures above show, we notice that approximately one fifth of the students have a part time job while they are studying in the university; this is possible because attendance at lectures and other classes in the Department of English is not compulsory. Thus in concluding this section we can see that the majority of students in the Department of English have a similar background. This might help in drawing conclusions that are applicable to the majority of students. With the exception of English teaching, none of the jobs are particularly likely to help students' language ability, and even English teaching is unlikely to support the skill of writing at university level.



- Section 2 consists of ten questions, some of which have follow-up questions. It is mainly devoted to the students' perception of their writing ability, how they write and the use of their native language when they write in English. The responses to these questions are dealt with in turn.

Question 5 is about the students' improvement in English since joining the university with respect to the four skills. The answers are shown below in Table 8.4 as follows:

**Table 8.4: Students' improvement in English relative to the four skills**

Skill	No improvement	A little	Some	Quite a lot	A lot
Listening	4	2	15	34	35
Speaking	10	17	23	25	25
Reading	-	1	8	33	48
Writing	-	-	14	30	46

The figures in table 8.4 above can be further interpreted by considering the scale 'Some' as neutral, the two figures on its right as positive (+), and those on the left as negative (-). After adding and subtracting the figures in table 8.4, we get the following results:

- Listening: +63
- Speaking: +23
- Reading: +80
- Writing: +76
- 

With respect to the figures above and in table 8.4, two points can be pointed out:

- (1) All of the students believed that they had made progress in some areas.
- (2) The best improvement was claimed for reading and writing, followed by listening and speaking.

The reasons behind this, I suggest, are first the special emphasis given to the writing and reading since the course the students take involves a great deal of reading (of literature) and assessment is mainly of written examinations. Secondly, the large size of classes makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the oral aspect of language to be practised adequately. Thirdly, related to the second reason, the type of teaching, namely lecturing, does not encourage speaking skills to be fully developed.

Question 6 is about the aspects of writing which improved while the students were at the university. Their responses are shown below in table 8.5, arranged in order of popularity:

**Table 8.5: Features of writing that had improved**

<b>The aspect of writing improved</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>
• the grammatical accuracy has increased	81
• the range of vocabulary has become wider	77
• the organization has become better	63
• the sentences have become longer	60
• the use of punctuation has become better	50
• others such as [written-in]: 1. I can write spontaneously, expressing my emotions 2. some of my thoughts have become little English [sic] 3. I see (sic) some phrases which I did not use at school	7

As the figures in table 8.5 show, we can see that the students felt that the grammatical accuracy and the range of vocabulary were the main areas of improvement, followed by organisation, longer sentences (also related to grammar) and the use of punctuation. These findings are generally confirmed in the syntactic and lexical analysis of students' writing and in the subjective assessment of the same students' writing made by native teachers of English, indicating that students have fairly sound perceptions of their ability, but they are unlike the findings reported by Pennington and Zhang (1993) where students believed that their vocabulary still needed improvement (see 3.7).

Moreover, a further analysis of the above question demonstrates that 4 students checked all six areas, 32 students checked five areas, 14 students checked four areas, 22 students checked three areas, 12 students checked two areas and 6 students checked only one area. This indicates that the majority of students felt that their writing improved in more than one aspect compared to only six students (6.6%) who felt that their writing had improved in only one aspect.

Question 8 is about the method of writing adopted by students when they write an essay in English. Their responses can be seen in Table 8.6, arranged in order of popularity:

**Table 8.6: The method of writing used by the students**

The method of writing used by the students	Number of cases
• I write an outline first	54
• I check grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation	51
• I check ideas and organization after I finish writing the first draft	40
• I revise my writing, by writing more than one draft	37
• I begin to write immediately without a plan	22
• I check my work paragraph by paragraph as I write	21
• I usually do not have time to check or revise	7
• Others [written-in]: 1. I put ideas randomly then I organise them into an essay 2. I organize ideas in my mind then I start writing 3. I like to write without a plan, but to be as requested from me (sic) - I do write with a plan first.	3

As the figures in Table 8.6 show, we notice a reasonable number of cases where students write using an outline first when compared to those who do not (54 in contrast to 22). This might indicate that some students are aware of the value of planning and editing in improving the quality of their writing in English. Further, both the mechanics and ideas are checked almost equally, with higher rates in the former (51 in contrast to 41). Since so much checking takes place, this suggests that students write at home and that they are given a reasonable length of time for writing in English in the final exam. However, less than half the students write

more than one draft or check ideas and organization, indicating a lack of understanding of good practice.

A further development of the analysis shows that none of the students checked eight (all methods), seven or even six methods. How the students checked the above question can be summarised as follows:

- 8 students checked five methods
- 11 students four methods
- 29 students three methods
- 22 students two methods
- 20 students one method

This indicates that more than two thirds of students adopt more than one method when they write in English and less than one third of them adopts only one method when writing in English. A possible explanation for this might be the circumstances in which they write.

Question 9 is about whether the students use Arabic while they write in English or not. Almost all the students (85 or 94.4%) indicated that they do not use Arabic when they write in English, whereas very few of them (5 or 5.4%) admitted to using Arabic. Further, those who used Arabic in their writing in English mentioned that they used Arabic either to think of ‘a lot of useful ideas’ or ‘to form ideas and organising them’. But the situation in the interviews was different: 40% found using Arabic to be positive, while 60% did not use it at all or found it to be negative. The reason behind such a low percentage in the use of Arabic, I suggest, might be due to the fact that all the tutors in the Department highly encourage students not to use Arabic when they write in English because, the tutors argue, the languages are completely different. The influence of the teachers was confirmed in the students’ responses in the interviews. Tutors’ effort in this respect seem to have been successful. But the related research regarding the use of L1 in L2 writing showed that it could be useful in particular at an advanced level of

learning. Friedlander (1990) found that using L1 could be useful in retrieving information. Students who planned in their native language and wrote about the topic related to their first language produced superior texts. In other words, the use of L1 for some topics brought about an improvement in the students' writing (For full details see 3.3).

Question 10 and 11 are about whether the differences in writing between English and Arabic cause any problem to the students when they write in English ; if 'yes' in which areas of writing do they feel the influence of Arabic?

More than half the students (54 or 60%) said 'No' and the others (36 or 40%) said 'Yes'. The areas of difficulty in those who answered 'yes' can be seen in Table 8.7, arranged in order of popularity:

**Table 8.7: Areas students find difficult**

Areas of Difficulty	Number of Cases
• Grammar and Structure	22
• Organization	16
• Ideas	8
• Others [written-in] such as: 1. Translation 2. Punctuation 3. Idioms 4. Preposition	6

As the figures above show, grammar and structure come first probably because the differences between the two languages appear to students to be greater in this area than others. However, the related research in this respect revealed that ESL writing problems may be influenced by both syntax and discourse features of the first language (see 3.4.1, 3.4.2).

A further point can be added here. Whereas 14 students checked two areas of difficulties the other 22 students checked only one difficulty. It is important to ask why so many students feel that they have no specific difficulties. In view of the

overall standards, it is unlikely to reveal the true position. Are students over-confident? Or are they embarrassed to admit to weaknesses?

Question 12 is about the students' preference for writing on topics that are related to Arabic or English. The reason for this question was to find out how many students preferred to write on topics related to their culture and language. This might tell something about their attitudes to writing on certain topics because in the relevant literature, it was found that certain topics which are related to culture tend to elicit more content and are easier to write on. For instance, Friedlander (1990) reported that students performed better in terms of content and grammar on topics that were related to their first language.

Their answers were as follows given in Table 8.8:

**Table 8.8: Topics students like to write on**

Topics	Number of Cases
• Related to Arabic	47
• Related to English	27
• Both of them	16

As the figures in Table 8.8 show, 52% of students, preferred to write on topics related to Arabic while 30% of students preferred to write on topics related to English and 17.7% of students did not mind writing on either.

Question 14 asked whether the students found it easier to write in English at home or under examination conditions. The reason for this question was to find out how many students felt that time constraints caused writing problems. This might indicate something about students' attitudes to editing their work. Those who chose 'at home' are likely to be more skilled in editing.

Their answers were as follows:

60 students (66.6%) chose 'At Home' and 30 (33.3%) chose 'In an Exam'

As the figures above show, we notice that those who chose to write at home were double in number to those who chose to write in an exam, which is not surprising. These percentages tend to confirm the natural tendency of human behaviour where students find easier to write when under less pressure. But in the interview, we had different responses: 60% preferred to write in the exam, 30% at home and 10% either.

The reasons given for their choice were given respectively below:

- 'Because I would have a lot of time to make sure that I have no spelling mistakes also to correct the grammatical one' [sic].
- 'Of course at home I feel more comfortable and this is what makes me write more easily'.
- 'Because I am able to concentrate more'.
- 'Because I have much (sic) time'.
- 'It is easier since at home there is a better atmosphere and no restriction of time. It is impossible in the exam to get references for aid (sic), while at home it is not'.
- 'At home I am more happy and calm. There is no pressure on me'.
- 'Sometimes I need the help of the grammar books and dictionaries'.

What is more surprising is that 30 (%33.3) students preferred writing in exam conditions. The reasons given for their choice were:

- 'When I write in an exam, I write in a very serious way, but in my home I rarely write in English or try to[sic]'.
- 'Because I have a specific time to produce a (sic) better work'.
- 'Because all ideas come to my mind'.
- 'Because in the exam, I obliged to write in the best way' [sic].
- 'Actually I don't try very hard to write at home, because I don't try to find ideas or topics to write about, therefore in the exam I'll be fixed to a certain topic, and write about it' [sic].
- 'I know that I cannot get any help in the exam so I depend on my own ideas and vocabularies [sic], in the exam the ideas flow easily'.

Samples only are given for the reasons in both cases above . Others were of a similar nature.

The relevant research regarding writing under different conditions did not reveal any significant differences between writing at home or in an exam as far as writing quality is concerned. Kroll (1990), for instance, found no significant differences between writing produced under two different conditions.

Question 15 is about how often students write in English. Their answers were given in Table 8.9, arranged in order of their popularity:

**Table 8.9: How often students write in English**

How often they write in English	Number of Cases
• Regularly every week	39
• Once every two weeks	16
• Less than once a month	16
• Never	9
• Once a month	8
• Others [written-in] 1. I write sometimes in Arabic. 2. I write whenever I am pessimistic, frustrated and sad.	2

As the figures in Table 8.9 show, we notice that about half of the students write regularly every week. Those who never try writing are few (9 students), which is a low figure, but, of course, these students still have to write in English in the examinations. It might be worth repeating here that writing during the course is optional. Nevertheless, most students regularly write on topics set by their tutors and expect this writing to be corrected by their tutors. Many teachers, who encourage students to write as much as possible, comment on these sample essays written by serious students, and provide oral or written feedback which assists students to improve their writing. This is closely linked to the coming section, which deals, in addition to reading, with feedback.



- This section, which is three, consists of seven questions about feedback on writing and reading in both Arabic and English. These questions are analysed one by one as follows:

Questions 16, 17 and 18 are about whether students receive feedback or not, the type of feedback they prefer and how they prefer their mistakes in writing to be dealt with.

To question 16 which is about whether the students receive feedback on their writing in English in the university, 50 students said 'Yes' and 40 students said 'No'. Those who answered yes, the feedback given was from the following sources: 33 cases, the majority, were from 'teachers'; 15 from 'peers' and 2 from others (mother and library). Moreover, with respect to their preferences for the type of feedback (written or spoken), we get the following results in table 8.10 below:

**Table 8.10: Preferred type of feedback**

Preferred Type of Feedback	Number of Cases
• written	47
• Spoken	30
• Both	13

Those who prefer written feedback, gave reasons as follows:

- 'Because I will organise also my ideas'.
- 'Because written feedback helps us to improve our grammar and vocabulary'.
- 'Because it is more reliable'.
- 'Because I like to learn how to write'.
- 'I prefer written feedback because I would be able to revise it in my writing later on'.

Those who chose the 'spoken' gave reasons such as:

- 'Because I support spoken languages rather than written ones, therefore I always want to speak and hear rather than write'.

- ‘Because I want to speak frequently in this foreign language’.

Those who chose both ‘written’ and spoken gave reasons such as:

- ‘Because both help me to organise my ideas’.
- ‘bec. [sic] both are useful in order to enrich my written + spoken language’.
- ‘to improve my English both W. and S. English’ (sic).

Samples only are given for the reasons supporting the type of feedback respectively. Others are of a similar nature.

With respect to the ways the students like teachers to handle their mistakes in writing (question 18) the answers were as follows (Table 8.11):

**Table 8.11: How mistakes in writing are dealt with**

how mistakes are dealt with	Number of Cases
• Underlined	12
• Corrected	28
• Both	49
• Neither	1

As the figures in Table 8.11 show, we notice that all the students, except one, wanted their mistakes either to be corrected or underlined or even both of them. This might indicate that the students do not object to their mistakes being pointed out and they want to improve their writing with the help of their tutors, whom they trust. Particularly significant is that 77% wanted actual correction of mistakes.

Question 19 and 20 were about the students’ reading in English and Arabic.

The majority of students (75 or 83.3%) said that they read other things in English in addition to their course books, while 15 students (16.6%) reported that they did not read anything. With respect to Arabic, the figures are different: 86 students (95.5%) said that they read in Arabic, while very few (4 or 4.4%) did not read anything. The types of reading in both languages, further, are given in Table 8.12 below:

**Table 8.12: Type of reading**

Type of Reading	Number of Cases in English	Number of cases in Arabic
• Poetry	17	36
• Drama	14	-
• Novels and Short Stories	45	34
• Magazines	34	49
• Newspapers	23	38
• Others	11	4

As the figures in Table 8.12 show, we notice differences in the type of reading in English and Arabic. These differences can be summarised as follows:

(1) Poetry: The students read more poetry in Arabic than in English. The reason might be because they are not yet sufficiently competent in English to enjoy reading poetry, which has its own peculiar rules and conventions.

(2) Drama: The students did not read any drama in Arabic, while they did in English. This might be because there are very few plays written in Arabic. A further factor is that in the Arabic tradition (of course as far as Syria is concerned) we have a 'movable stage' which moves around most of the places in Syria (in particular in the countryside) at specific times (such as national occasions) and puts on performances of plays, mainly for entertainment. Further, many plays are shown on television, for both teaching and enjoyment. Drama in Arabic is, therefore, seen more as a performance art. Drama in English is rarely performed in Syria and is only available in written form.

(3) Novels and Short Stories: A very interesting point is that the students read more novels and short stories in English than in Arabic. The reason behind this, I suggest, is that the students are majoring in English and read the set course books. Further, they feel it necessary for them to increase their reading in English.

(4) Magazines and Newspapers: It is not surprising that the students read more magazines and newspapers in Arabic than they do in English. The reason is that the

number and the quantity of magazines and newspapers available is much greater in Arabic than in English. However, sixteen English periodicals were mentioned as follows:

News Week	Times
The Syria Times	Sputnik
Readers' Digest	The Middle East Health
Common Health [sic]	Smash Hits
Scientific Magazines	Today
Rome and Vatican	English for International Communication and American English
Business	Industrial World
Global Finance	Sunday Times

The most frequently read English periodicals were **News Week**, **Times** and **The Syria Times** in English. In Arabic 30 periodicals were mentioned. These are mainly published in Syria although other countries were mentioned:

Al-Arabi	Alwan (Colours)
The Arabic Struggle	Al-Mukhtar (The Chosen)
Al-Baath	Al-Hayaat (The Life)
Tishreen (October)	Al-Naqid (Criticism)
Al-Itihaad (The Union)	Al-Hasnaa (The Beautiful)
Al-Jeel (The Generation)	Al-Anbaa (News)
Sayidati (My Lady)	Al-Jamaahir (The Masses)
Tabibak (Your Medical Doctor)	Al-Bayaan (The Statement)
Al-Akhbaar (News)	The Mother
The World of Knowledge	Youth and Sport
Al-Thawra (Revolution)	The Ambassador
Universal Knowledge	Foreign Literature
Fayrouze	Al-Majalla (The Magazine)
Al-syaad (Fisherman)	Al-shabaka (The Net)
Al-Dyaar (The Homes)	The Social Magazine

The most frequent ones were **Al-Arabi** magazine, which is published in Kuwait and the local newspapers such **Tishreen** and **Al-Baath**.

The relevant research regarding the reading-writing relationship has shown that reading, in particular for pleasure, has a positive impact on the learner's language proficiency especially in writing. For instance, Hafiz and Tudor(1989) reported that reading for pleasure influenced students' linguistic competence, in particular writing skills. (For further detail see 3.5).

Question 21 was about how the students found certain factors (mentioned below) helpful in improving their writing in English in terms of a scale of 5 points.

The students' responses were as follows, shown in Table 8.13 below:

**Table 8.13: Scaling type of learning in terms of usefulness to writing**

Type of Learning	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
• Attending classes	-	-	6	7	77
• Private tuition	14	24	16	8	26
• Teacher-made handouts	5	16	30	17	22
• Notes made by other students	11	18	24	19	18
• One's own notes	2	7	18	19	47
• The Course books	3	8	8	20	47
Cassettes, videos, etc.	6	13	10	31	28
• Others such as reading, practising writing and references	-	-	-	-	8

As the figures in the table 8.13 show, we notice that attending classes, one's own notes and course books are found by the students to be most useful in improving their written English; the least useful are notes made by other students, teacher's handouts and private tuition.

Further Analysis can be made to the above question by considering the scale 3 in the table 8.13 above to be neutral, and the two scales on the right side (4 and 5) to

be positive (+), and the two scales on the left side (1 and 2) to be negative (-).

Thus after adding and subtracting the figures in table 8.13, we get the following results shown in the table 8.14 arranged in terms of polarity:

**Table 8.14: The popularity of learning type**

Type of Learning	Polarity
1. Attending Courses	+84
2. One's own notes	+57
3. The course books	+55
4. Cassettes, videos, etc.	+40
5. Teacher-made handouts	+18
6. Notes made by other students	+8
7. Others such as reading and practising writing	+8
8. Private tuition	-4

Significantly, students do not, on the whole, value reading and writing practice highly.

Question 22 is about whether the students found any particular book which helped them to write better in English.

Their answers were as follows:

57 students (63.3%) said 'No' and 33 (36.6%) said 'Yes'. There were about 20 books which students mentioned as helpful. The books fell into different categories as follows:

**(1) Grammar books:**

Quirk, R. and Others. 1985. A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. London: Longman (3 times).

Quirk, R. and S. Greenbaum. 1973. A University Grammar of English. London: Longman.

Thomson, A. J. and A. V. Martinet. 1960 A Practical English Grammar. Oxford: Oxford University Press (4 times).

Shepherd, J. and Others. 1984. Ways to Grammar: A Modern English Practice Book. London: Macmillan.

Huddleston, R. 1984. Introduction to the Grammar of English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Grammar Books in General (twice)

**(2) Composition Books:**

Nestby, J. 1982. Your Guide to Composition. Aleppo: Aleppo University Press.  
(4 times)

Klammer, E. 1978. Paragraph Sense: A Basic Rhetoric. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

Flower, L. 1981. Problem- Solving Strategies for Writing. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.

Composition Books in General (3 times)

**(3) Literature Books:**

Adventures in English Literature ( Author(s) and publishers are not known).

Theory of Criticism (Author(s) and publishers are not known).

**and (4) General English books:**

Common Mistakes in English (Author(s) and publishers are not known)(5 times).

Essential English for Foreign Students (Author(s) and publishers are not known)(2 times).

Food for Thought (Author(s) and publishers are not known)(2 times).

Getting in/ on Knowledge (Author(s) and publishers are not known).

In concluding this section, I might say that students reported that their grammatical accuracy had improved during their years in university. They also reported improvements in spelling. The analysis of their written essays and the subjective assessment of their writing made by native teachers of English confirmed their questionnaire responses regarding the syntactic complexity of their writing. Spelling had also improved in the fourth year. However, in the case of punctuation, their responses were not in complete harmony with their written work because

they still have serious punctuation mistakes. One interesting point is that students perceive overt instruction and correction by teachers to be helpful. They do not recognise to the same degree the value of practice, re-drafting, or reading. Thus they have a fairly traditional approach to what is useful to them. In Chapter 9, suggestions are made to raise their awareness of the value of practice and revision in writing development.

## **7.2. Interviews**

As mentioned earlier in the data and methodology chapter, these interviews, which took place after the students had filled in the questionnaire, were conducted with a random sample of ten students (ten equally divided between female and male) in their final stages of study at the Department of English in Aleppo University. The interviews were conducted in the students' native language, Arabic. The possibility of conducting these interviews in English was considered, but, it was thought that this would affect the amount of information they would provide. Many of them, particularly the shy students, prefer not to speak in English in front of their tutors, (the researcher was one of them), especially when being recorded on tapes. It was therefore decided to use Arabic. This has the advantages of avoiding any chance of misunderstanding of the questions. All the selected students were asked if they agreed to be interviewed. Students were interviewed individually after they expressed their agreement. As was the case with the questionnaire, the students were told before the interviews that their information would be confidential and would be used only for the purposes of the current study. Further, it was explained that their teachers would not read their responses, which has the advantage, I think, of encouraging the students to provide more information and express their attitudes freely without being afraid of any kind of embarrassment with their teachers. The interviews were conducted informally and in a friendly atmosphere so that the students might feel more relaxed and encouraged to provide more information. All the interviews started with general chat about their summer vacations and gradually moved to the specific questions relative to the current research.



All the questions in the interviews were listed down. This was partially to ensure that all students were asked the same questions and partially to help in the analysis of their responses.

As mentioned in the questionnaire, the aim of these interviews was twofold. First, it aimed at eliciting students' attitudes to their courses and to their own perception of their writing ability. Secondly, these interviews were conducted to verify and expand on the students' responses given in the questionnaire since the questions of these interviews covered basically the same areas as those of the questionnaire (Mustafa 1995 followed a similar model, using the interview to verify the questionnaire responses). In other words, these interviews were designed to reveal the differences, if any, or even contradictions between the types of information provided in the questionnaire.

The questions of the interviews were eight in number. These questions cover the areas: (1) attitudes to and perception of progress in writing, (2) types of feedback and treatment of errors in writing and (3) the use of L1 when writing in L2 and the writing-reading relationship. A copy of these questions and students' transcribed responses in English is given in Appendix 4. These items are dealt with separately below

### **8.2.1 Interpreting students' responses**

- Section one was aimed at eliciting students' attitudes toward writing. It consisted of three questions, which are discussed in turn. Each question is concerned with a specific area but in order to stimulate discussion follow-up questions were used as they became necessary.

Question 1: How do you feel with respect to your writing ability after joining the university? Follow-up questions: Has it improved or not? If yes, in which areas do you think that your writing ability has improved and why?

All students reported that their writing ability had improved ‘a lot and noticeably’ since they joined the university. The areas that they felt had most improved were grammar, vocabulary and organisation. Doubtless, there were many reasons behind such improvement, but high on the list of responses were (1) attending lectures and classes, (2) taking notes from lecturers, (3) reading intensively and (4) writing frequently. These results are similar to a large extent to those found in the questionnaire information where grammar, vocabulary and organisation were checked by students to be the aspects in which most improvement had taken place.

Here are some sample students’ responses to question one:

- ‘My writing ability has improved a lot. It has improved in grammar noticeably. The ideas I can express increased by having a wide range of vocabulary and being able to connect them logically and reasonably. The reasons for this improvement were attending lectures or classes’.
- ‘I feel much improvement in writing after joining the university, which gave me the chance to learn new words and new structures, to spell better and maintain my skills through reading and attending lectures and practising writing’.
- ‘I feel there is a big difference. In year one I used Arabic and then translated into English. There were many mistakes in grammar and my style was poor and weak. Tenses were mixed. Now there has been a big difference in all subjects and aspects. For me, I watch films, hear news and attend lectures. I write better and can correct some of my mistakes in grammar, change tenses and I feel confident. The difference is clear. Attending lectures helped me a lot’.

Other students’ responses to question 1 were of similar nature.

Question 2: How is writing important to you?

In answer to question two which is about the importance of writing to students, all students emphasised the importance of writing in the Department of English because it is the only way used to assess students’ progress since all examinations are written. Here are some of their responses:

- 'Writing is very important in this Department because all exams are done in writing'.
- 'Writing is very important. Some students never say a word, yet they get the highest marks in the exam. This is unfair' [His implication was that the system of evaluation which is mainly based on writing is unfair because many students pass the exam when they can only speak a few connected sentences whereas many students, on the other hand, are fluent in speaking English, yet they fail because their writing has some errors. In other words, he is asking for a better way of assessing students which takes into account both oral and written aspects of language.].
- 'Writing is very important because it is the only way to judge or assess students' failure or success and determine their future'.

Other students' responses to the above questions were more or less the same.

A possible comment on the students' attitudes to and their perceptions of writing might be that the majority of students, if not all, are strongly and extrinsically motivated to write in English. Their main concern, most teachers think, is to pass the exam and get the degree, irrespective of whether this situation reflects in reality actual learning or not. This view seems to be supported by the interview even though in the questionnaire 75 cases, reported by students, indicated that they were studying English because they wanted to be able to communicate with English speakers and 41 cases indicated that they wanted to continue studying in an English speaking country. In the interviews, they do not appear to be intrinsically motivated in the sense that they do not express any interest in writing.

Moreover, even their extrinsic motivation seems limited, they are not worried about whether learning writing in English is applicable and related to their profession or whether it would help them in pursuing higher studies. Their expressed motivation is the exam only. This might be due to the fact that passing the exam particularly with higher marks is socially accepted and appreciated.

This international context of learning which gives more emphasis to mere passing of exams is unusual in many places around the world, where access to knowledge and acquisition of skills is more important than just passing the exam. In Syria, just passing the exam does not always reflect truly and honestly what is happening in reality. This is because in some cases teachers for a variety of reasons (such as administrative pressure) allow students to pass an exam, even if the students' work is not really of an appropriate standard.

Question 3: Do you see any difference(s) in writing in English under different conditions (in the exam or at home, for instance)? A follow-up question: In which condition do you think you can write better and why?

The reason for this question, as mentioned in the questionnaire, was to find out how many students felt that time limits caused writing problems for them. It was believed that this might indicate something about students' attitudes to editing their work. Those who preferred working at home might be more skilled in editing. Their responses were as follows:

Six (out of ten) students (60%) reported writing better *in the exam*, three (30%) mentioned that they write better *at home*, while one (10%) was neutral in his response. Of particular interest is that these results are completely different from those found in the questionnaire. In the questionnaire students' responses were the other way round as follows: 66% of the students chose *at home* and 33% chose *in the exam*. A possible explanation for this difference might be, I suggest, related to the psychology of the students, as noted by one student reported here.

Those who favoured *in the exam* gave reasons for their choice as follows: (Here are some of their responses):

- 'In the exam I write better. Personally, I do not write well at home. I like to write under pressure or authority: three hours [the time given for the exam questions] result in either failure or success. The length of time has no role in the writing quality; it is much more a result of concentration'.

- ‘In the exam, there is a pressure or obligation: I have to write better. Time makes no difference, though at home I might make fewer mistakes’.

These students are not aware of the vital role of editing and revising writing, which is missing in most cases of writing under examination circumstances because there is less time to edit or revise. This lack of awareness might be due to that they have not been taught how to revise their work, which I doubt, or they mis-value this process, which is most likely the case. This is different from El-Shafie’s (1990) findings. He reported that all the twelve subjects of his study believed that time has a great effect on the quality of their writing. They performed well, they argued, when they were given ample time to revise their work. Further, they reported that when they wrote in class, they revised locally (at the surface or word level), but when they wrote at home, they revised more globally (at the sentence and text level) (for further detail see Chapter Two, section 5 in this thesis).

In my interviews, those who preferred *at home* gave the following reasons:

- ‘I write better at home because (1) I have a wider imagination and (2) I can revise and check facts in grammar books or dictionaries. In the exam, however, the time is limited’.
- ‘At home I feel more relaxed, psychologically speaking. But there are exceptions. Once I wrote an essay at home and had it corrected by my teacher but it was a failure, but in the exam, I passed. Perhaps the type of the question had influenced the way in which I discussed the topic’. A likely explanation of this case is that the student either misjudged things because passing the exam might have blinded him to many things such as the fact that his work may have improved because of the feedback he received from his teacher on his writing, or the student might have been given a push to pass because it happens so frequently that teachers let students succeed in exams even if their writing is not really good enough to pass.

The one who did not favour either, offered the following argument:

- 'It has to do with the psychology of the students. In the exam, we are under pressure and feel obliged to do well. At home we do not have it, but we can use a dictionary and grammar references to check spelling'.

The relevant research relative to writing under two different conditions did not indicate any significant differences in the quality of writing, according to Kroll (1990) for instance, but this research, of course, is limited.

- Section two consists of two questions dealing with the type of feedback and the treatment of errors in writing.

Question 4: Which type of feedback do you prefer to receive ? Give reasons.

In responding to question four, five students out of ten reported that they preferred written feedback, two liked oral feedback and three favoured both oral and written. These results generally confirm those reported in the questionnaire.

Those who favoured the written type gave their reasons as follows (only some examples are reported because others were of similar nature):

- 'It is more permanent and can be checked for reference when necessary'.
- 'In written comment, I can contemplate, for instance, why I made these mistakes, whereas in the oral feedback, the idea of contemplation is missing'.

Those who preferred the oral type gave the following reasons:

- 'Spoken feedback (in class) so that other students can benefit from the same mistakes. Likewise, I benefit from similar cases made by others when teachers talk about errors made by other students. Furthermore, teachers have no time to write written comments.
- 'Spoken comments are best because some of the teachers do not want to disappoint students. Further more, some written comments are ambiguous (I do not understand them). Signs of teachers' pleasure at good work (praise) can be

seen on their faces'. This supports Zamel's ideas regarding teachers' written comments on students' writing.

Those who favoured both oral and written gave the following reasons:

- 'Both oral and written comments are useful, each having its advantages. In the written, the feedback is more durable and can be checked for reference. Though the oral, on the other hand, one can improve the oral aspects of language, speaking for instance'.
- 'Written and spoken if possible because they help communication between teachers and students, provide more information and help create a friendly atmosphere between them.'

Question 5: How do you like teachers to deal with your writing mistakes?

Students' responses to question five can be summarised as follows:

Two students reported that they just wanted their mistakes to be underlined with an abbreviated code system to indicate the location and the type of errors (such as T. for tense and W for wrong word or word order). Here one of them reported that when he corrects his underlined spelling mistakes, he benefits from going back to the dictionary or grammar books because he then never forgets the correct spelling. Further, he added, correction by the student saves a lot of time for the teachers in particularly large classes. The other student noted that correction by teachers might lead to students' laziness. Also two students wanted their mistakes just to be corrected without underlining. Whereas six students mentioned that they liked their teachers to underline their mistakes in writing and to correct them with slight variations. For instance, one student reported that at the primary stage of their learning at the university, say first year, he liked his mistakes both to be underlined and corrected. But in the final stage, fourth year or graduation, it was enough that these errors were underlined with symbols indicating their type and then corrected by himself. Another student mentioned that if the teacher has time it is good to have one's mistakes corrected but otherwise he himself would correct them. Particularly significant is that 80% of students would like actual correction of mistakes.

These results support to a large extent the results reported in the questionnaire which were 13.3% (for underlined), 31.1% (for corrected), 54.4% (for both underlined and corrected) and 85.5% overall for actual correction.

Some students commented on the actual marking of work and observed that teachers are not consistent in, for example, the number of marks deducted for certain errors, such as spelling.

- Section three concerns the role of L1 when writing in L2 and the relationship of reading to writing.

Question 6: How do you see using L1 (Arabic in this case) when writing in English?  
follow-up questions: Does it help or impede? Why is this so?

It was explained to the students what was meant by using L1 (here Arabic) when writing in English. This meant either thinking in Arabic first to gather the ideas in one's mind then translating them into English or writing down on the paper the outline or the main ideas in Arabic then translating them into English.

In answer to question 6, which is about the role of L1 when writing in L2, students' responses were as follows:

Four students reported that using L1 (Arabic here) has a negative role when writing in L2 (English here) in particular at low levels or even in related subjects. This might be due, they argue, to the differences between the two languages such as active and passive structures which are not similar in structure in the two languages. Further, related to the above reason, using Arabic will result in many problems such as 'Arabisms' and 'literal translation'. Here are some examples of their responses:

- 'Using Arabic is very harmful even when it is related to Arabic. Since we are learning English, we should write in English. The structure of sentences in the two languages is different and this causes problems to students to translate literally.



To avoid this we need more direct contact with the native speakers of English to learn English structures’.

- ‘The use of Arabic is very harmful. We should write in English directly, think in English and avoid translation that may result in Arabisms. When we are teachers, we should draw students’ attention from the beginning not to use Arabic when writing in English’.

Two students never used or thought in Arabic when they wrote in English because they write directly in English, but they did not say whether they think this is negative or positive. This might be due to the fact that these two students were born in Britain and their mothers were native speakers of English, and they were taught in English until they completed their primary schools. I discovered this fact after interviewing these two students. Here are their responses:

- ‘I do not use Arabic when I write in English. This is no problem to me. I think in English and the differences between the languages are not a problem at all’.
- ‘I do not use Arabic. When I write in English, I never think in Arabic’.

Four students mentioned that Arabic has positive effects when writing in English in particular in certain subjects which are related to the Arabic culture where ideas can be rich and detailed. Further, though teachers recommend using English, some students still use Arabic because it comes instinctively to them. Here is an example of their responses:

- ‘Positive. It does not cause any problem. Teachers ask us to think in English, but we cannot. It is instinctive to us. Translation is useful especially in topics related to the Arabic culture where there are rich ideas and the compositions will be better’.

In the relevant literature relative to the role of L1 in Writing L2, for instance Freidlander (1990), it was found that using L1 when writing in L2 was helpful in improving the students’ writing, at least in planning. Further, the role of L1 in the writing of L2 can be most beneficial for certain topics which were related to language

and culture. On the other hand, there is a very strong tradition in language teaching that interference from L1 is likely to cause problems.

Question 7: Do you think that reading helps improving writing? If yes, what kind of reading do you prefer to read?

In answer to question 7 which is about the impact of reading on writing, we get the following students' responses:

All the students emphasised the importance of the reading-writing relationship, noting that the former affects the latter, rather than the other way round. The more you read, they added, the better writing becomes. Regarding the kind of reading, the students mentioned that all types of reading, except poetry and drama, are useful, in particular short stories, novels, composition books, magazines and news papers because they help with clarity and simplicity of styles. Poetry and drama are seen as difficult because they have their unique and special styles and less relevant to the type of writing students undertake. Here are some examples of their responses:

- 'The more you read, the more you can express. Reading things such as short stories is helpful. In addition, newspapers and magazines are also useful'.
- 'It depends on the personality of the student. Reading teaches the students to avoid mistakes and in first and second years there is a book which deals with the common mistakes made by non-native learners of English. Reading books such as novels is helpful because of simplicity and clarity in style'.
- 'Reading affects writing. It is better to start with reading easy articles and move gradually toward difficult ones, not the other way round to avoid failure in comprehension. Short stories are good in this respect'.
- 'Reading affects writing. When one reads, one's style develops and becomes better. Reading also helps one learn a wide range of vocabulary. Newspapers and magazines are comprehensive. In literature, the short stories are particularly good, but not poetry or drama because of their special and different styles'.
- 'The relationship between them is very important. In order to write well, we should read a lot of novels and short stories (to know how to write), magazines

and newspapers to learn more vocabulary especially idioms and fixed expressions’.

Other students’ responses were of a similar nature.

Similar results with respect to the types of reading are found in the questionnaire, where novels, short stories, magazines and newspapers were ticked frequently in the list of reading text types.

Question 8: Do you feel anything has helped to improve your writing ability directly?

In answer to question 8, the last item in the interviews, which is about anything students think helped them improve their writing ability directly, students’ responses can be summarised as follows: some students mentioned again that frequency of writing and being corrected by teachers had improved their writing. Other students mentioned that attending lectures and studying teachers’ notes in both the secondary schools and university level were having a positive impact on their writing quality. Still other students reported that reading novels and short stories in addition to composition course books (in particular those they had in first and second years of their study in the university) were behind the improvement of their writing. The composition books they mentioned were: *Comprehension and Composition I and II* compiled by Dr. A. Hassani, a Syrian tutor in the Department of English. This series of books consists of selected comprehension passages on various topics of interest in addition to exercises and activities on writing skills. The other book was *Your Guide to Composition*, written by an American lecturer who used to teach English in this Department in the early 80s. This book contains information about the writing technique in addition to samples of students’ corrected essays, where special emphasis is devoted to the teacher’s treatment of errors using the code abbreviated system. These books used to be course books in the first two years of university study, but currently are used as reference books because they have been replaced by different course books.

Here are some of their responses:

- ‘Writing frequently, reading and seeing teachers [that is conferences]’.
- ‘Teachers’ notes in both secondary schools and university study. Miss teacher x was very helpful and she encouraged us a lot by giving us pieces of advice and comments on our compositions’.
- ‘Composition and comprehension course books taught in the first and second year in this Department, written by Dr. Hassani and *Your Guide to Composition* written by J. Nestby, an American lecturer, were very helpful in improving our writing’.

Other students’ responses were of similar nature.

Similar responses are found in the questionnaire with respect to the emphasis given to the composition books by students who found them to be very useful in improving their writing.

In concluding this section, I might say the analysis of students’ transcribed responses confirmed their questionnaire responses in many aspects such as the features of writing in which improvement occurred, the type of feedback and treatment of errors in writing, and the types of reading. However, on writing under exam conditions or in free circumstances, their responses were completely different from the questionnaire responses. This might be explained by the small number of students interviewed.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

Broadly speaking, I can say that students’ responses in the questionnaire and interviews succeeded in identifying students’ attitudes to the course. Surprisingly, students are disposed to writing and have a positive attitude to the type of teaching they have received. Further, they seem over-confident about using English because they did not admit having problems, such as spelling and punctuation, which the analyses have revealed. Moreover, some contradictions were seen in their responses as far as the role of L1 and writing under two different conditions were concerned. On the other hand, they did not display any intrinsic motivation. While they seemed to read for pleasure, they did not talk about writing for pleasure. Writing is seen as just a means of passing examinations. The students, it appears to me, did not understand the

importance of writing in actual life. In the final chapter, I discuss how to raise learners' awareness of writing.

## **CHAPTER NINE: Summary, Implications and Suggestions**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This study set out to undertake a detailed analysis of the development of students' writing ability. This chapter, the final one, is designed to round up the present study. It consists of three main sections. Section 9.2 presents a brief summary of the present research findings. This includes the main findings of the various analyses of the current study from the previous chapters in addition to the students' attitudes to and perceptions of writing reported in the questionnaire and interviews. Section 9.3 addresses the implications and recommendations for the teaching of writing at the Department of English in Aleppo University in the light of these findings. Limitations of the study are discussed in 9.4. Section 9.5 is given to suggestions for further research, followed by a brief conclusion in 9.6.

### **9.2 Findings of the Current Study**

The current research investigates the proposition that as the students study a language longer, they should be able to write better in many measurable ways. Students of English in their final stages of university study should display signs of development by having a wider range of vocabulary, a better control of syntax and morphology and better skills at the discourse and rhetorical levels. In other words, we would expect that the writing of fourth year students should reveal improvement when compared with their writing when they were in the first year. The main results of these analyses can be summarized as follows:

- Quite surprisingly, the results have not shown significant differences between the students' writing at first year and fourth year in terms of grammatical complexity, *when measured as the number of words per sentence*. Quite surprising, the results have revealed that when the length of sentences of students' writing in both years was measured using the conventional index of sentence, that is the initial capital letter and the final full stop, we got misleading information about the complexity of students' sentences. Many sentences of students' writing in both years, in particular year 1, were found to be considerably longer than is normal in native

speakers at undergraduate level. The reason behind such results, I suggest, is that the students especially in year 1 did not punctuate their writing properly. In particular, they used many commas, where full stops were needed. The results were found to be similar to Hunt's findings regarding the writing of fourth grade students in comparison to twelfth graders when measured by the traditional sentence index (see 4.2).

- However, when the students' grammatical complexity was measured by 'T-units' index, we could see better indications of students' writing improvement in this respect. With respect to increasing the length of 'T-units', all students except three showed increases in their 'T-units' length, which is a high and positive result, while only 3 students decreased their T-units length.
- Regarding the use of some conjuncts or connecting devices such as co-ordination, or markers of cause and effect and conditionals, the results have revealed that students did not use many subordinators at either level. A possible explanation for this is that these devices were not necessary in the short pieces of writing produced. Alternatively, students may not have been aware of the functions of these devices in writing or they did not know how to use them effectively. It seems most likely that students felt the need for cohesive devices but lacked a proper command of them since the analysis demonstrated that both groups of students used many co-ordination devices or linkers, in particular 'and', which alone was actually used by all students in both years. This finding of high frequencies of 'and' is in harmony with other studies carried out by some previous researchers of writing in English by Arabic speakers who noted the overuse of co-ordination by their subjects. The reason behind the frequent use of 'and' in the data of this study could be that co-ordination is basic and very frequent in all languages. In Arabic, unlike English, there is a preference for the use of co-ordinating conjunctions (in particular 'and') to join clauses or sentences. But subordinating structures in Arabic are relatively infrequent, if not rare. Further, co-ordinating devices are easy to acquire because they are few in number and they

do not have subtle semantic differences as is the case with the other connecting devices such as those indicating concession and contrast.

- Concerning relative pronouns, the analysis shows that 'who' and 'which' were the most frequent at both levels, though with higher frequencies in year 4. Further, the frequencies (at level 4) of 'who' and 'which' were similar to the frequencies of 'who' and 'which' in the Spoken English Corpus (SEC), a study made by Meygle 1992, in the sense that these two relative pronouns were the most frequent ones. These results are consistent with the findings of most grammarians (Quirk 1968 and Huddleston 1971 for instance) who found that 'which' is the most frequent relative pronoun in both spoken and written English in restrictive and non-restrictive clauses (See Huddleston 1972: 259).
- Regarding the use of passives and the use of third person pronouns, the results show that these grammatical variables were used more frequently by the advanced learners than first year students.
- In terms of lexis, the results reveal that the fourth year students' vocabulary size became wider than the first year students. Moreover, a high percentage of vocabulary of first year students belongs to the General Service Word list and a low percentage of vocabulary belongs to the University Word List. The number of words which are not found in either word list reveals that fourth year students ( 259 on average words in contrast to 145 words) had a wider range of vocabulary than first year students. This reflects reading in literature and criticism in the final year of the degree course.
- Concerning type/token ratio, the analysis reveals that the writing of the fourth year students had a lower ratio of types/tokens, with an overall average 0.52 in contrast to 0.55 of the first year students' writing. The possible explanation for this decrease in type/token ratio was that the fourth year texts were longer than first year texts, and shorter texts generally tend to have more type words as suggested by Faerch and others (1984) . In addition, the fourth year students



wrote on two topics, while the first year students wrote on three different topics; the more topics covered, the higher the type/token ratio. But when texts of the same length from both levels (100 words for instance) are compared in terms of type/token ratio, we can see that the fourth year students used more varied type words than first year students did; this is an aspect of improvement.

- Regarding lexical density, the analysis shows that the writing of fourth year students was denser and more variable than first year students' writing, which indicates an improvement on the part of fourth year students. The lexical density for students' writing was 45% and 48% respectively. These figures are comparable with the lexical density of written texts (number 15, 16 and 21) reported by Ure (For further detail see 6.2.2).

Students' attitudes to and perceptions of writing were obtained by means of a questionnaire and interviews conducted with a sample of students at their final stage of learning. However, it should be noted that the students who filled in the questionnaire and who were willing to be interviewed are not identical with those students whose exam scripts were linguistically analysed. This limitation of the questionnaire, which was beyond the researcher's control, can be taken into account in future studies so that the information given by the same subjects by means of different methods can be verified.

The major points from the questionnaire and interviews can be summarised as follows:

- The students' educational backgrounds are similar to a large extent. This should increase the validity of the finding of the current study.
- The students are strongly and positively motivated instrumentally and integratively to learning English. This might encourage the staff and administration at the Department of English in Aleppo University to design courses which make students more fully prepared to pursue postgraduate studies

in English, or to undertake professional employment where the language could be used.

- The students feel confident about their writing abilities and reported that their skills improved a lot in most aspects of writing, in particular in grammar.
- The majority of students stressed the importance of writing to them since it is the only means of assessment used to judge students' success or failure. It was noticeable that here success on the course seemed more important than success in mastering the writing skill. However, some of them in the interviews expressed their dissatisfaction at the neglect of other language skills like speaking because many students complete their studies and become graduates but they are not able to communicate efficiently in English orally. This is a message to the authorities in the Department of English that other language skills should be assessed in testing students' achievement.
- Almost all students in general reported that they read a lot in both English and Arabic particularly magazines and news papers in addition to their course books. Nevertheless, the analyses of their exam scripts revealed that they were able to write only relatively short essays (an overall average 252.03 words in year 1 and 314.01 words in year 4) in examination conditions. Also their command of 'core' vocabulary is limited, which might indicate that they have not benefited much from their wide variety of reading. The short texts they have written might be blamed on the system which encourages them to write in a limited number of words, and the limited vocabulary can be explained by the fact that their productive knowledge is not the same as their receptive knowledge. In other words, the students might know more but they did not display this knowledge in their writing. This issue of the disparity between production and comprehension needs further investigation in future studies.
- Regarding teacher's feedback on students' writing, 66.6% of students preferred written comments, which is in harmony with the preference for teachers' written comments reported in the related literature. Further, 77% of students liked actual

correction of their mistakes in writing by their tutors, whom they trust. This positive and encouraging attitude of students towards their teachers' dealing with their mistakes in writing should be highlighted because it shows that the students actually want to improve their writing. Other types of feedback (the oral or spoken for example) were chosen by some students.

- The majority of students, if not all, stressed the importance of attending classes to improve their writing skills. This might indicate that attending writing or composition classes in the Department of English should be given special emphasis, if not made obligatory. A grade could be given to each student for attendance so that the students are encouraged to attend their classes regularly.
- As regards the subjective assessment of a sample of the same students' essays made by native teachers of English, the results have shown that organisation, range of vocabulary and complex structures were the aspects of writing most improved. This supports in a way earlier findings indicated by the various analyses made by the researcher in this study.
- A number of native teachers commented on the specific type of lexis used by final year students, noting that it tended to be 'literary', 'archaic'. and 'old-fashioned'. This accords with the findings in the vocabulary frequency analysis that showed an unusually large number of words that are not found in standard vocabulary lists.

### **9.3 Implications for the teaching of writing**

As noted from the start, this study has been mainly concerned with the linguistic analysis of written work produced by students majoring in English at different stages of learning under exam conditions. In the light of these research findings, the following recommendations can be made for the teaching of writing:

### **1) The length of writing tasks**

As the results have revealed, we found that the pieces of writing produced by students at both levels were limited in terms of number of words, though they were longer in year 4. The mean length for the first year students is 253. words per essay, and the mean for the fourth year students is 314. words per essay. In view of the time allowed (90 minutes) for the students at both levels to finish their essays, these are not long enough. Therefore I recommend that the length of pieces of writing should be taken into account by the tutors and course designers in the Department.

Despite the constraint of large classes and marking considerations, students should be positively encouraged to write more especially when they are majoring English.

Students can be told to write longer pieces of writing, such as essays. In addition they could be required to prepare project papers, which would not necessarily have to be marked; they might be written to be read and discussed by classmates and teachers.

This has the advantage, I think, of preparing students to write longer pieces of work if they continue their studies on Diploma or MA courses, or to write more fluently in professional positions. In addition, this will enable students to satisfy the requirements stipulated by most companies and business firms, where reports and longer pieces of writing are required.

### **2) Special care with spelling**

As the analysis has shown, spelling mistakes are a major problem to the students learning English. Special emphasis should be given to the areas where the differences between L1 and the target language are great and are expected to cause problems to learners of English. For instance in English, unlike Arabic, the pair of phonemes /b/ and /p/ on the one hand and /f/ and /v/ on the other hand are possible areas of problems to the Arab learners both in pronunciation and spelling. If more careful attention is given to such areas by raising students' awareness of these differences in written and oral exercises, chances of making spelling mistakes in these areas will be lessened to a great extent, I suggest. In this respect, Nation (1990) suggests several ways in which teachers can help their learners to master the spelling system. For

example, learners can be encouraged to use *analogy*, the most useful method, to learn new vocabulary. Further, learners can be taught several spelling rules such as those regarding short and long vowels, the doubling of consonants, treatment of *y* and dropping final silent *e* (for full discussion of these rules see Leech and Svartvik 1975: 291-292).

Moreover, of particular interest is one case where a first year student made spelling mistakes consistently in the words 'sweat' and 'sweet'. He used the former twice in the place of the latter, and the latter once in the place of the former. These mistakes are not made carelessly or randomly; they are clearly made consciously. Students consistently have problems when words have a similar consonant root, like /s/, /w/, /t/. This confirms the research of Ryan (1993), who found that Arab learners make more mistakes in words that share a similar consonant structure when compared with other European learners. Therefore this area should be given due care by tutors and course designers. Students need planned instruction in the graphic representation of English vowels and diphthongs.

### **3) Appropriate degree of formality in academic writing**

The analysis has revealed that the students' writing at both levels, but particularly in the first year, has some characteristics of oral language. For example, there were many examples of contractions and use of initials and other informalities, which are not recommended in academic writing. Students, therefore, should be trained from the start and encouraged to avoid using such devices in their writing. This can be achieved when teachers bring into the classroom samples of articles of different genres where they show the students by illustration how the writers of these articles achieved acceptable degrees of formality in their writing.

### **4) Increasing grammatical complexity**

As the results have shown, the grammatical complexity of students' writing increased over the time of their university study, but it still needs further development so that it matches the standard of advanced learners of English as a second language. This can be achieved in a number of different ways as follows:

- *Sentence-combining practice*

It is widely believed that sentence-combining practice which is reported in studies such as Mellon (1969), O'Hare (1973) is useful in increasing the grammatical complexity of students' writing. Therefore, I recommend using the new and modified version of this exercise suggested by Enginarlar (1994:218), which he calls 'sentence combining plus'. This new version of a sentence combining exercise has many advantages. This type of sentence combining has a rhetorical dimension and takes note of the presence of the context beyond the sentence level: the text or discourse.

- *Raising students' awareness of the different sentence structures in English*

Teachers of writing or composition in particular in the grammar class, should increase students' awareness of the different sentence structures in English. For instance, teachers can show students how cause and effect or conditionals are formed or expressed, by giving them tasks which require the students to supply either causes or reasons on the one hand and to give condition clauses or the result clauses on the other hand as given in Swales and Feak (1994: 22, 135).

Moreover, teachers can follow or adopt Hedge's (1988: 130) different suggestions such as pair-work editing and reformulation for improving students' writing. In these techniques, students can be shown how they can increase the grammatical complexity of their writing. This should be approached or dealt with from a functional point of view, where these activities can be related to students' writing tasks and rhetorical functions.

- *Frequency of writing*

Students can be encouraged by their teachers to practise writing more frequently. Further, teachers can encourage their students to submit their writing in more than one draft. After looking at the first draft, teachers can show the students how to increase the sentence complexity of their writing or how to improve cohesion, for example. In this way students will not only develop better control over the different

sentence structures in English and cohesion in English, but they will see the value of revision in improving their writing as well.

### **5) Broadening the scope of writing**

Teachers should consider the possibility of broadening the scope of the writing in the course and in the final examination. The present course focuses on literary texts and on writing on subjects from literature. This seems to be reflected in the type of vocabulary that the students use as shown in the frequency counts and in the native speaker teachers' subjective comments. If the students were encouraged to write on a wider set of topics, perhaps drawing on their reading from magazines and newspapers in English (See 2. 4), they might gain control of a greater core vocabulary and learn more words from the University Word List. Some topics might embrace issues such as science, technology, environmental matters, current affairs or other international concerns. As was explained in Chapter 1 some students enter the department after a secondary school course with a scientific orientation. Such a development might be of interest to them.

### **6) Increasing learners' vocabulary**

In answering the question 'How many words does a second language learner need?', Nation (1990: 11) has suggested two ways: first, considering the vocabulary of native speakers as the goal and secondly looking at the results of frequency counts and the practical experience of second language teachers and researchers. For instance, Nation reported Nagy and Anderson's research (1984), which suggested that the vocabulary size of undergraduate native speakers could be approximately 20,000 words (an average of 1000 to 2000 words a year). Further, Nation reported that the frequency counts of vocabulary in texts written by young native speakers had shown that the most frequent words are 2000 words (known as the General Service Word List, which covers 87% of the text) and 800 words (known as University Word List, which covers 8% of the text), with a total of 2800 words that could cover 95% of the text. Thus depending on learners' aim, teachers can choose to target suitable word lists. If their aim is to cover the four language skills, then a 'multi-purpose' list like the General Service Word List could be a suitable one. But if their aim is to read for a

university degree, then the University Word List could be a suitable one. Therefore, these two word lists, which include a large number of vocabulary items, should be given special emphasis by both teachers and learners. However, these word lists do not include specific vocabulary which students use for literary purposes.

### **7) General comment on teaching innovation**

Previous research (summarized in Chapter 3) has drawn attention to the importance of feedback and re-drafting. By encouraging and recommending students to submit their writing in more than one draft, teachers in their written comments on the initial drafts of students' writing can draw students' attention to problems of this kind in their writing so that the final drafts become academically acceptable.

Of course, any teaching innovations would have to be introduced gradually and with care on an experimental basis. Evaluation of any changes would be needed and students' progress should be monitored.

### **9.4 Limitations of the study**

As noted in the data collection and methodology chapter, this research mainly focused on the linguistic analysis of students' writing at university level under exam conditions with the purpose of identifying, if any, the progress they have made over the period of four years. But this research has its own limitations which can be taken into account in further research. These limitations can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The topics on which students were asked to write their essays was beyond the researcher's control because the data goes back to exam scripts of 1989-1992.
- 2) It was not possible to interview the students who wrote the texts that were analysed as these students had left the university. Therefore the interviews had to be conducted with students of a similar type and level. This also applied to questionnaire distribution.



3) Analyses in the current thesis only covered 60 exam scripts for two years (30 for each year), that is to say years 1 and 4. The reasons behind such limiting of data analysis were lack of space and time (further discussed in Chapter 3: Data collection and Methodology); the other secondary exam scripts (60) which were collected are available for later research.

4) Only pieces of writing produced under exam conditions were considered and analysed in the current study. There is considerable scope for the analysis of writing produced in the home or classroom. The results could be compared with writing under exam conditions.

## **9. 5 Implications for further research**

In the light of the limitations of the current study, the suggestions for further research can be summarized as follows:

1) In this study, little attention has been paid to the content of writing. As explained in data collection and methodology chapter, there might be some side effects due to the differences in the content of topics which students chose to write on. Therefore, I suggest that further research could take this point into consideration by analysing writing produced by the same subjects at different stages of university learning, but having the same content to eliminate any possible side effects that might arise due to the differences in the topic. This could be achieved if the teachers themselves carried out action research. A teacher, for example, of level 1 could tell students to write on a certain topic, and these essays could be kept for later analysis. By the time the same students reached level 4, the teacher could tell them to write on the same topic, previously written on by the same students four years ago. At this stage the teacher could analyse these two pieces of writing to see if any improvements have been made by the students. Further, the results of such research could be compared with the findings of the current research to see whether the content affects the results or not.

2) With regard to the conditions under which the writing analysed is produced, it was noted that the data were written exam scripts where the use of dictionaries or other

references was not allowed. Of particular interest is the need for other research , it seems to me, to analyse and compare writing produced under different conditions ( at home and in the exam for example) by the same subjects at the same stages of learning. There is not much research on this issue and the results are not in harmony with each other. For instance, Kroll (1990: 147) found no significant differences between writing produced by ESL postgraduate students under different conditions, but El-Shafie (1990) reported that all his subjects, who were at secondary schools, felt that their writing at home was much better than their writing in the exam. Al-Shafie's results confirm the normal tendency of human learning to write better under relaxed conditions than under pressure.

3) Concerning the use of the same informants whose exam scripts are linguistically analysed in the questionnaire and interviews, it was noted in the data and methodology chapter that getting the same subjects for the different methods of collecting data was not possible. Future research is needed which takes into consideration the use of the same informants in all methods of collecting data. This would have the advantage of verifying the different types of information provided by the same subjects, and in the long run pointing out any differences or even contradictions between them.

4) The questionnaire analysis showed students' interest in reading English newspapers and magazines. This could be built on in teaching.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

The present study has examined in some detail the development of students' writing ability at university level. Further, the analyses have demonstrated clearly, for various aspects of writing, the progress students made in their writing skills. Nevertheless, there is still room for further improvement in students' writing skills. In addition, it is hoped that the present study will encourage all those who are interested and involved in the teaching of writing in this Department to carry out further research, the results of which could be compared to the current study, with the ultimate aim of finding ways of improving the students' writing skills.

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## **APPENDIX 1: COURSE BOOKS WITH THEIR AUTHORS TAUGHT IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

The versions I am giving here are photocopies from the ones used by the Head of the Department of English. The writing appearing on them (the margins) other than English is Arabic, which is used for administrative purposes. In addition, a large part of the information given in Chapter ONE is based on Aleppo university General Catalogue in Arabic (authors are unknown).

✓ ١٥٩٤	Bronte	Jane Eyre	نور
✓ (٤٦٣)	Williams	The glass menagerie	مصر
✓ ١٣٨	Bell	Thirteen short stories	في
✓ ٩٣٩	Alexander	A first book in comprehension	استيعاب
✓ ١٤٩٢	Ladefoged	A course in phonetics	صوتيات
✓ ١٢٤٤	Taylor	Ways to grammar	تراكيب
✓ ٢١٩	Klammer	Paragraph sense	
✓ ٨٠٩	Flower	Problem solving	انت
✓ (٤٩٩)	Wilde	An ideal husband	مصر
✗ نقد	Caskell	Mary Barton	
✓ ١١٣٤	Hassani&Madi&Risha	Selected passages	ترجمة
✓ ١١٢٤	Hassani	An introduction to English poetry	شعر
✓ ١٨	Hassani&Salhani	A course in English comprehension	X
✓ ١٠٤٥	Hassani	A course in English & compositions	٢/ استيعاب
✓ ٦٣٢	Hueber	Lernziel Deutsch /1	
✓ ٦٣٢	=	=	فهرس الكلمات
✓ (٩٠)	=	=	دروس و نصوص ق١
✓ ٣٣٥٨	قاموس	Longman	

التصنيف : .....

الموضوع : .....

كتب كلية الاداب والعلوم الانسانية / اللغة الانكليزية

( السنة الثانية )

العدد المتوفر  
بتاريخ ١٧/١٢/٢٠١٤

اسم المؤلف	اسم الكتاب
Jonson	Volpone مرمي
Fielding	Joseph andrews نثر
Shakespeare	As you like it شبيب
Shakespeare	The tempest شبيب
Shakespeare	Othello شبيب
Marlowe	Doctor Faustus مرمي
Leeson	The new golden treasury شعر
Webster	The duchess of malfy مرمي
Burgess	English literature نثر
Austen	Emma نثر
Sachs	Now read on
Hassani&Asfary	A course in English comprehension III-IV نثر
O'Conner	Phonetics صوتيات
Soliman	Shakespear's X
Kebbe	An introduction to English phonetics X
Schiker&Salhani&Hassani	A study of the renaissance poetry X
Guirke	University Grammar of English قراء
Austen	Pride and prejudice X
Defoe	Moll flanders نثر

التصنيف :

الموضوع :

كتب كلية الاداب والعلوم الانسانية / اللغة الانكليزية

( السنة الثالثة )

..... :

العدد المتوفر  
بتاريخ ٢١ / ١٠ / ١٩٩٣

اسم المؤلف

اسم الكتاب

٤٥٢	Graver	Advanced English practice	تراكيب
١٥٠٥	Williams	A street car	سرم أمريكي
٦٣٣	Shakespeare	Hamlet	شكبير
١٦٢٩	Shakespeare	Antony and Cleopatra	شكبير
١٥٥٧	Congreve	The way of the world	سرخين
٤٢٠	Dryden	All for love	سرخين
✓ ١٤١٥	Hardy	Jude the obscure	نثر
نقد	Thomson	A practical English grammar	قواعد اللغة
✗ ٣٤٣	Gregg	Cognitive processes	
٢٠٨	Eliot	The mill on the floss	نثر
٦٦٧	Huddleston	Introduction to the grammar	قواعد
?? → ١٢٩١	✗ Miller	Death of a salesman	
١٨٤	Dickens	Great Expectation	نثر
١٦٦٢	Sheridan	The rivals	سرخين
٢٦٥	Rodman	An introduction to language	لغويات
نقد	Soliman	English poetry neo classicism	✗
نقد	Iskandar	The cultural heritage	✗
✗ ٤	Dickens	Hard times	✗
١٣٤١	Dorsch	Classical literary criticism	نقد
٥٦٧	Hitchcock	Rhetoric	انسان
✓ ١٣٧٠	Bronte	Wuthering heights	نثر
١٤٦	Allen	The English novel	رمان
٨٨٤	Schicker	Literary criticism	نقد
✓ ١٤٤٧	Nestey	Your guide to composition	انسان
✓ ١٢٠١	Hassani & Iskandar	A history of English thought	فكر
— ٢٨٧	Hassani	An introduction to Victorian novel	نثر
٣٢	Evans	A short history of literature	✗
✓ ١٦٩٧	Emach	An anthology of American poetry	أمريكي

التصنيف : .....

الموضوع : .....

العسدد المتداول  
بتاريخ ٢١/١٢/٢٠١٦

اسم المؤلف	اسم الكتاب
Ben Carne	An introduction to linguistics
Smith&Wilson	Modern linguistics
Joyce	A portrait of the artist
Woolf	To the light house
Hawthorns	The scarlet letter
Bradbury	Modernism
Lawrence	Woman in love
Sartre	The flies
Daiches	Critical approaches
Aeschylus	The oresteia
Hemingway	For whom the bell tolls
Osborne	Look back in anger
Dostoyevsky	Crime and punishment
Steinbeck	Of mice and men
Homer	The Odyssey
Moliere	The misanthrope and other plays
Beckett	Happy days
Ibsen	The master builder
Shaw	Major Barbara
Conrad	Lord Jim
Madi&AbuRisha	Victorian and modern poetry
Hassani	Textual studies in comparative
Hassani	Studies in comparative
Chekhov	Plays - the cherry or chard
Twin	The adventures of Huckle berry
Lawrence	The Virgin and the Jipsy
Fry	The ladys not for burning
Williams	Drama from Ibsen to Brecht
Beckett	Waiting for godot
Homer	The iliad
Virgil	The aeneid
Soliman&Iskandar	Modern drama
Nestebv	American. novels
Schicker	Literary criticism
Herrington	For whom the Bell Tolls
Schicker&Madi	English critical essays

## **Appendix 2: Data collected but not analysed in the present research**

- **Second Year: 30 exam scripts of Composition**

The students were also asked to write an essay on one of the following topics: (1) Describe a Snow Storm, (2) Write about your Impressions on Returning to your Home District after an Absence of Several Years and (3) Write about the Life in a Village or Town Bordering an Enemy-held Territory: insecurity, tension and fear due to attacks and secret raids. The time for this exam was 90 minutes and the full mark was 40 as well. The lowest and highest marks are 9 and 36 respectively.

- **Third year: 30 exam scripts of Composition**

The students were asked to write on one of the following topics: (1) Write a Story about a Traffic Accident, (2) Write on University Final Examinations and (3) Discuss the Scientific and Poetic Approaches to Flowers. The time for this exam was 3 hours and the full mark was 100. The lowest and highest marks are 38 and 80 respectively.



### APPENDIX 3: Questionnaire items

#### UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK- UNIVERSITY OF ALEPPO

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE. TERM 1: 1994

Name:

Department:

Year of Study:

#### SECTION ONE

1. What is your knowledge of the following languages? Tick as many as appropriate:

	speaking	reading	writing	listening
Arabic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
French	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others ( specify....)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Do you receive any help with English from any of your family ( e.g. conversation, instruction, reading materials) Yes ☐ No ☐

If you ticked 'YES', what type of help do you get?

3. Tick why you personally wanted to learn English ( You may tick more than one):

☐ To help you get a better job

☐ To become a teacher of English

☐ To be able to communicate easily with English speakers

☐ To pursue your higher education in an English speaking country

☐ Others ( specify).....

4. Do you have a part time job while you are studying at the university?

Yes ☐ No ☐

#### Section Two

5. Compared to your first year in the university, do you feel that your English has improved?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If 'YES', tick how each of the following skills improved (1: not all; 5 very much)

	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speaking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Regarding your writing ability from first year until now, in which categories do you think that it has improved? Tick as many as appropriate

- ☐ My grammatical accuracy has increased
- ☐ I can write longer sentences
- ☐ I have a wider range of vocabulary
- ☐ I can use punctuation correctly
- ☐ I am better at organising my ideas
- ☐ I am better at sequencing ideas logically and in a coherent way
- ☐ Others ( specify) .....

7. If your writing ability has *NOT* improved, what do you think are the reasons behind this?

Tick as many as appropriate

- ☐ You missed a lot of classes
- ☐ The classes were too large
- ☐ There was little instruction about writing
- ☐ The course books were not appropriately chosen
- ☐ You did not practice writing as required
- ☐ You did not read useful books
- ☐ Others ( specify) .....

8. Which of the following methods do you adopt when you write an essay? Tick as many as appropriate

- ☐ I begin to write immediately without a plan
- ☐ I write an outline first
- ☐ I revise my writing, by writing more than one draft
- ☐ I check ideas and organisation after I finished writing the first draft
- ☐ I check my work paragraph by paragraph as I write
- ☐ I check grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation
- ☐ I usually do not have time to check or revise
- ☐ Others ( specify) .....

9. When you write in English, do you use Arabic first and then translate into English?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If YES, do you find using Arabic useful in improving your writing ability?

Yes ☐ No ☐

10. When writing in English, do the differences in writing between English and Arabic cause you any problem(s)? Yes ☐ No ☐

11. If YES, which of the following problems do you have? Tick as many as appropriate

- ☐ Grammar and structure      ☐ Organisation ☐ Ideas
- ☐ Others specify).....

12. What is your favourite topic when you write in English? Would you prefer to write on the topics that are related to your culture ( a wedding party in your country, for instance) or on topics that are culturally related to English ( an English film, for instance)?

related to Arabic ☐ related to English ☐

13. Does the type of questions in the exam influence the quality of your writing?

Yes ☐ No ☐. In either CASE, please say why? .....

.....

14. Do you think that you write better at home rather in an exam?

Yes ☐ No ☐. If YES, please give your reasons .....

.....

15. Tick how often you write anything in English?

☐ regularly every week

☐ once every two weeks

☐ once a month

☐ less than once a month

☐ never

### Section Three

16. In the university, do you receive feedback on your writing?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If YES, tick from whom do you receive it?

☐ teacher ☐ peers (classmates) ☐ others (specify).....

17. Do you prefer to receive written or spoken feedback?

written ☐ spoken ☐

Please give your reasons .....

18. How do you like your writing mistakes to be dealt with?

underlined ☐ corrected ☐ both ☐ neither ☐

19. Do you read anything in English in addition to your course books?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If YES, tick which kind of reading you like to read?

☐ poetry ☐ drama ☐ novels and short stories ☐ magazines

☐ newspapers. ☐ others ( specify) .....

If you read newspapers or magazines, give example title.....

20. What do you regularly read written in Arabic?

☐ poetry      ☐ short stories or novels      ☐ magazines      ☐ newspapers

☐ others ( specify) .....

If you read newspaper or magazines, give example title.....

21. How **HELPFUL** have you found each of the following in improving your written English? Circle the appropriate number for each item

Note: 1= Not at all helpful; 5= Extremely helpful

a. attending classes	1	2	3	4	5
b. private tuition	1	2	3	4	5
c. teacher-made handouts	1	2	3	4	5
d. notes made by other students	1	2	3	4	5
e. your own notes	1	2	3	4	5
f. the course books	1	2	3	4	5
g. cassettes, videos, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
h. others ( specify.....)	1	2	3	4	5

22. Is there any particular book which has helped you to write better in English?

Yes ☐      No ☐

If **SO**, please give the title:.....

#### **Appendix 4: Students' attitudes to writing, obtained by means of interviews**

In appendix 4, I list the questions asked to the interviewees, followed by students' answers. Originally, Both the questions and students' transcribed responses were in Arabic. Then they were translated into English. First, I start with the questions as follows:

1. How do you feel with respect to your writing ability after joining the university?  
Follow-up questions: Has it improved or not? If yes, in which areas do you think that your writing ability has improved and why?
2. How is writing important to you?
3. Do you see any difference(s) in writing in English under different conditions (in the exam or at home, for instance)? A follow-up question: In which condition do you think you can write better and why?
4. Which type of feedback do you prefer to receive ? Give reasons.
5. How do you like teachers to deal with your writing mistakes?
6. How do you see using L1 (Arabic in this case) when writing in English? A follow-up question: Does it help or why is this so?
7. Do you think that reading helps improving writing? If yes, what kind of reading do you prefer to read?
8. Do you feel anything has helped to improve your writing ability directly?

Now I list some of the students' transcribed responses to the above listed questions, respectively:

##### Student 1

- 1) The writing has improved a lot and the direct causes for this were one's note taking from lecturers and attending classes. My writing has improved noticeably in grammar. The ideas increased by having a wide range of vocabulary and connecting them in a logic order.
- 2) Writing is very important to me. It decides students' future.
- 3) At home, I write better because my imagination is wider and I can check grammar books and other reference books such as dictionary.

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- 4) Both written and oral feedback are useful, each having its advantages. The written is more durable and can be checked for reference; the oral would improve the oral aspects of language.
  - 5) At primary stage, first year for instance, I like my mistakes to be underlined and corrected at the same time. But at a later stage, fourth year for instance, it is enough to underline the mistakes with symbols on them and I can correct them.
  - 6) L1 use is negative in particular at low levels because there are many differences between the two languages such as passive and active constructions. But in some topics which are related to Arabic culture provided the learner is good at translating these ideas into English, its role could be positive. Otherwise, we may have literal translation, which is not recommended.
  - 7) The more you read, the more one can express one's self. Reading short stories and news papers and magazines are useful.
  - 8) My teachers' notes at the university have direct influence on my writing. Miss X was very helpful because she encourages students very much by commenting on students' compositions.

#### Student 2

- 1) My writing has improved noticeably in particular regarding grammar and arrangement of ideas. The reasons behind this are seeing teachers and their comments. The difference between the secondary school and the university is big as far as writing in terms of paragraphs and practising writing more frequently.
- 2) Writing has a decisive role in students' lives.
- 3) I write better in the exam because I concentrate more. Time does not play a major role in revising ideas since no great change will take place in the second draft.
- 4) I prefer the written feedback, based on the sight sense. It is more permanent and can be checked when necessary.
- 5) I like a mistake to be corrected indicating its location. I do not mind commenting on my ideas. Further, peer's comments are accepted provided they are not embarrassing.
- 6) I do not use L1 because there are many differences between the two language systems, which cause problems to students.

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- 7) It depends on the student's personality. Reading teaches the mistakes and in years 1 and 2 there is a book about this. I prefer reading novels because of their clarity and simplicity in style.
  - 8) Writing more frequently and being corrected had direct influences on my writing.

### Student 3

- 1) My writing has become better since I joined the university. The reasons behind this were trying to write more, attending classes and reading.
- 2) Writing is very important in students' lives.
- 3) At home, I feel relaxed, psychologically speaking. But there are exceptions. For instance, once I wrote an essay and was corrected by my teachers, considering it as failure, but in the exam I passed. Perhaps the type of questions has a certain role and the way of discussion.
- 4) I prefer both the written and oral feedback, if possible, because they establish solid connection between teachers and students, creating a friendly atmosphere between them.
- 5) I prefer to correct my mistakes, but if the teacher has time, it is good to correct my mistakes.
- 6) Since we are learning English as a second language, we find ourselves obliged to think in Arabic when writing in English. It can be used as final stage to correct what we have written. In some cases, if the topic is related to Arabic, I do not mind writing in Arabic first, then translating it into English.
- 7) The relation between reading and writing is very great, and it should be balanced. Novels and composition books are very useful.
- 8) Attending classes and the friendly relationship between teachers and students had direct impacts on my writing.

### Student 4

- 1) I feel much improvement after joining the university, which gave me the chance to learn many new words and structures. My spelling became better. The reasons behind this were reading, attending classes and practising writing.
- 2) Writing is very decisive in the students' lives.



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- 3) In the exam, I write better. Personally, I do not write well at home. I like to write under pressure or authority, in the exam for example, which leads to either failure or success. Time has no role in the quality of writing.
  - 4) I prefer oral feedback so that other students can benefit from these mistakes. In the same way I might benefit from other students' mistakes. Further written comments are time consuming.
  - 5) I like my mistakes to be underlined and corrected, but correcting all mistakes may cause laziness.
  - 6) Using Arabic is very harmful even in topics related to Arabic cultures. Since we are learning English, we should write in English. The structures of the sentence in the two languages are different and cause many problems to students. To avoid this direct contacts with native speakers are needed.
  - 7) Reading affects writing, where new words and structures can be kept. Reading all genres of languages are useful.
  - 8) In addition to reading novels and short stories, attending classes had direct impacts on my writing ability. Further, Common mistakes in English is a good book.

### **Student 5**

- 1) My writing ability improved to a large extent, in particular the range of vocabulary, which comes from reading and attending classes.
- 2) Writing is very important in this department because it is the only method to evaluate students' achievement.
- 3) I write better in the exam because there is a pressure. Time has no role in improving the quality of writing.
- 4) I like written feedback because it lasts for longer time.
- 5) I prefer my mistakes to be underlined with a symbol indicating its type and to correct them by myself. In spelling mistakes I need to go back to the dictionary, and it is very difficult to forget the spelling of that word.
- 6) Using L1 is very harmful. I think and write in English directly to avoid translation which might cause 'Arabisim'. Teachers should draw students' attention from the start to these problems.

- 7) The more one reads the more writing is improved. Reading articles, newspapers, magazines and novels are useful.
- 8) Studying very hard and reading articles has influenced my writing to a large extent.

### **Student 6**

A great development and many changes occurred in many aspects of my writing. The reasons were attending lectures and reading.

- 2) Writing is very important because it is the only method to assess students' progress. Since the exam is written, we should pay special attention to improve our writing.
- 3) I write better in the exam, because there is a necessity and time does not play much part in improving writing.
- 4) I like oral feedback because some written comments are ambiguous. Further, signs of praising can be seen easily on the faces.
- 5) I like my mistakes to be corrected by teachers though it may cause laziness.
- 6) L1 use is positive and does not cause any problem. Teachers encourage us to think in English, but we cannot avoid thinking in Arabic because it is something innate. There are richer ideas in topics related to Arabic culture. Translation is useful when one knows how to translate.
- 7) Reading affects writing. It is good to start with reading easy articles and magazines in addition to short stories.
- 8) Comprehension and composition books in Years 1 and 2 were very useful. These books should be used in years 3 and 4 because we need them. Another book is **Your Guide to Composition**, by an American lecturer.

### **Student 7**

- 1) I felt many differences: In year 1 I used Arabic and translated into English afterwards. There were many mistakes in grammar (such as tense confusion) and the style was weak. But now the situation is different in all aspects of writing. I write better and correct some mistakes in grammar; I feel confident. Attending classes helped me a lot.

- 2) Writing is important, but there should be balance between the written and oral aspects of language, because some students graduate and cannot express themselves in speech, but they get the highest marks in the written exam. This issue should be taken into account by the authorities in this department.
- 3) I write better in the exam because there is pressure and time does not make many differences though the mistakes are fewer at home.
- 4) I like the written comments because they are permanent and one can go back to them when necessary.
- 5) I want my mistakes to be underlined and corrected because it is easier and quicker.
- 6) In secondary school Arabic is used to a large extent, but in university the situation is different: Arabic is used sparingly.
- 7) Reading affects writing because when one reads, his style develops and becomes better. One's range of vocabulary becomes wider. Newspapers and magazines are very useful.
- 8) Attending classes, note taking and course books had direct impacts on my writing ability.

### **Student 8**

- 1) My writing has improved a lot for several reasons such as composition teachers and reading. It improved in organisation, grammar and structure.
- 2) Writing is very important because it is the only method by which students' future is determined.
- 3) It has to do with the students' psychology. In the exam we have pressure, but at home there is not any pressure and we can use reference books and dictionary to check spelling for example.
- 4) I like the written comments because I can contemplate and see my mistakes, but in the oral comments the idea of contemplation is missing.
- 5) I prefer my mistakes to be underlined and corrected by teachers.
- 6) In certain subjects the use of L1 might be helpful. Due to the differences between the two languages, we should know what is suitable for each language in particular the fixed expressions.

7) The relation between reading and writing is very important. In order to write well, we should read many novels and short stories in addition to newspapers and magazines.

8) Some books of composition such as 'Your Guide to Composition' had direct influence on my writing ability.

### **Student 9**

1) Of course, my writing improved and noticeable changes in syntax, organisation and style can be seen between year 1 and year 4 in the university. In year 1, my writing was not as smooth as in year 4.

2) Writing is very important in this department because all exams are in written.

3) At home, I can use references and there is no pressure, which is a better position to write better.

4) Actually I like the written comments because they are permanent.

5) I prefer my mistakes to be underlined only even without indicating symbols.

6) I do not use L1 when I write in English. I never think in Arabic. But when the topic is related to Arabic, it might be useful.

7) When one reads different texts, writing will be improved. The more one reads the more writing becomes better. Reading newspapers and magazines are useful.

8) Our teachers, I think, had direct impacts on my writing.

### **Students 10**

1) My writing improved in ideas and grammar. Our teachers and attending classes were the reasons behind this improvement.

2) Writing is very important in this department. If you have a good style, you can succeed easily.

3) In the exam I write better. Time makes no difference.

4) I like the spoken feedback. I do not feel any embarrassment, but actually I do not mind either because each has its own advantages. The written can be used for reference when needed and the spoken improves the oral aspects of language.

5) I like my mistakes to be corrected by my teachers.

6) I do not use L1 when I write in English. Writing in English is no problem to me because I think in English.

7) The more you read, the better in writing you become because you get new ideas, but we should not read to memorise. All types of genres are good. Television might help also.

8) Writing is very important. If one has a good style, one can pass the exam.

### Appendix:5 Spelling Mistakes

In this appendix, I list all the spelling mistakes found in the data of the current research, together with their correct form, beginning with Year 1.

#### Year 1

Wrong Form	Correct Form
accure	cure
adventage	advantage
advices	advice (pieces of advice)
afriad	afraid
aimlessely	aimlessly
ambaluance	ambulance
anguishes	anguish
appologized	apologized
ariels	aerials
arround	around
attak	attack
attension	attention
automic	atomic
beared	bore
beated	beat
begining	beginning
beliefe	belief
beliefe (v)	believe
besid	beside
bicyle	bicycle
bit	beat
boyes	boys
bulid	build
chease	cheese
conseliation	consolation

continu	continue
contries	countries
decideded	decided
decission	decision
decreas	decrease
destinguish	distinguish
destrict (2)	district
devided	divided
discribe	describe
discus	discuss
excelent	excellent
existance	existence
exploide	explode
faltring	faltering
fier	fire
fillings	feelings
fragrant	fragment
funy	funny
to got	to get
grazy	crazy
hanger	hunger
helpt	helped
hitted	hit
hopfull	hopeful
humilated	humiliated
hurtet	hurt
husbend	husband
imagen	imagine
jewelless	jewels
laid	lay
learned	learnt

lonliness	loneliness
loose	lose
maks	makes
mericules	miracles
mumber	member
namelly	namely
nervious	nervous
obeied	obeyed
our life	our lives
pasport	passport
pennieless	penniless
puting	putting
quarrelsomes	quarrelsome
reliefs	relief
repaire	repair
replays	replies
ruines	ruins
separate	separate
sircumstances	circumstances
sittuation	situation
spreaded	spread
sticked	stuck
stoon	stone
submittes	submits
to success	succeed
sweat heart	sweet heart
teme (2)	team
terriblly	terribly
theirs jobs	their jobs
throwing	throwing
tikes	ticks



travell	travel
unfortunatly	unfortunately
unimploymment	unemployment
untill	until
vailuable	valuable
voilent	violent
ware	aware
Whit House	White House
whole	a whole
worke	work

**Year 4**

<b>Wrong Form</b>	<b>Correct Form</b>
accomodating	accommodating
awar	aware
blinde (3)	blind
challange (2)	challenge
devine	divine
envent	invent
faibles	fables
godess (2)	goddess
helpfull	helpful
heros	heroes
herps	herbs
hypocicy	hypocrisy
hypocracy	hypocrisy
insegnificant	insignificant
intered	entered
lovable (3)	loveable
mets	met
monstor	monster
nacked	naked
prefered (4)	preferred
puishment	punishment
puting	putting
realy (2)	really
refues	refuse
resistence	resistance
severly	severely
stent	stunt
sweat	sweet
travells	travels

uncincere	insincere
wiset	wisest
wonderfull	wonderful

## APPENDIX 6: LIST OF WORDS FROM STUDENTS' ESSAYS IN BOTH YEARS NOT FOUND IN ANY WORD LISTS

This appendix contains the words from students' essays in both years which are not found in any word lists with which they were compared. These words are arranged alphabetically, each year is listed separately. Further, those words which were spelt wrongly are corrected by the researcher.

### First Year

accessible	active	activity	affective
alas	ambulance	appreciable	ascended
automatic	barriers	basic	bench
charity	clue	coffin	consolation
crazy	delegation	dent	description
destructive	device	dignity	director
disaster	dishonest	display	drammatical
economical	emulation	endanger	entitled
eradication	exaggeration	excessive	faltering
famine	first	fling	flit
foreve	friendship	fugitive	funny
gashing	ghost	gift	glory
grammars	hastily	headlights	hegemony
hence	heroine	hint	historic
hobby	hopeful	humanistic	humanity
humiliated	humorous	humour	illegal
illusion	imagination	immoral	immortalized
injustice	inner	innocent	jams
joyful	jumpy	knights	knowledge
lap	latent	loitering	luxurious
marvellous	metres	miracle	mistaken
nervous	noisy	nothing	obedient

obstacles	obstructors	occupation	orphan
pacify	painful	panic	passports
pat	pavement	personality	philanthropy
piano	pitiful	prostitute	puddles
quarrelsome	resume	review	ruthless
savage	scope	screaming	screen
selfishness	sentiment	sentimental	sham
shepherd	sorrowfully	standstill	statue
strengthen	strove	submissive	submit
successful	sunset	surrender	survive
symbolize	tale	television	thrilled
thus	tragedy	tragical	treatment
tumult	vain	valuable	vehicle
vice	whatever	whereas	whole
within			

#### Fourth Year

ability	accent	accommodating	achievement
admiration	affection	affectionate	amaze
amazement	backbiting	banish	basic
bathe	beggars	behaviour	beloved
brandishing	bravery	brevity	brilliant
brine	careful	cavern	characteristics
charity	charming	classical	comparison
compassion	conceal	concealment	concentration
conception	concerning	conclude	conclusion
condemn	consort	conventions	coquettish
corruption	couple	craft	crew
cunning	debris	deception	defaults
defenceless	defy	despite	determination
dialogue	differentiate	differently	disappear
disarming	discretion	dissect	earthquake
emphasise	enchantment	encouragement	endows
endure	entrance	epic	epitome
essence	evidence	exaggeration	excepting
excitement	extent	extreme	extremist
fable	faithful	faithfulness	fidelity
first	flatter	flatterer	flattering
flattery	flee	focal	folk
follies	formidable	fortifications	frankness
furnish	furthermore	gallant	generosity
giant	gift	glorious	goddess
golden	graces	grant	grieving
guarantee	hatred	haughtiness	helpful
hence	herbs	heroic	heroine

hollowness	homeland	hypocrisy	hypocrite
ideal	idealism	imagination	immortal
immortality	impression	imprisoned	incarnate
inconsistency	indifference	indifferent	indomitable
inexperienced	infatuated	inflexible	insignificant
insincere	instinctive	institution	integrities
intellectual	intelligence	interference	interpretation
justification	kneel	knowledge	lawful
likewise	lion	literary	loveable
luxurious	magical	magnificent	manhood
manifests	manifolds	mentality	mere
misanthropist	misanthropy	mistress	mitigate
monster	morality	moreover	mortals
motherland	muse	naked	narrate
narration	narrator	nevertheless	nowadays
nymph	obstacles	operate	optimistic
overwhelm	paradise	passionate	patriotic
patriotism	penetrate	permeate	portraying
preferable	princess	probe	prominent
prophecy	prospective	prosperity	prototype
quotation	rare	ravage	realistic
realistically	reality	realm	recklessness
recognise	reechoed	reference	refusal
refuse	regardless	reproach	requirement
resourcefulness	sack	scourge	seduce
self	semi	sharpened	spur
static	statue	stint	strategy
subtlety	supernatural	survived	tackled
tactfully	tactfulness	temptation	tenacious
tendency	terrible	thoughtfulness	thus
triumph	unfaltering	unique	universal

universality	unlovable	unloving	unmatchable
unquestionable	unsparing	untruthfulness	upheld
usurpers	utter	valuable	vanish
vanity	viewpoint	vision	vulgarity
vulnerable	warriors	whole	wisest
witticism	wriggle	yearns	



## **Appendix 7: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES)**

### **Framework for Communicative Test of Writing**

## Degree of Skill

### CERTIFICATES OF COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN ENGLISH: Writing

In order to achieve a pass at a given level candidates must demonstrate the ability to complete the tasks set with the degree of skill specified by these criteria:

	Level 1	Level 2
<b>ACCURACY</b>	Grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation may be uncertain but what candidates write is intelligible and unambiguous.	Generally good control of grammar, vocabulary spelling and punctuation though some errors which do not destroy communication are acceptable.
<b>APPROPRIACY</b>	Use of language is broadly appropriate to the task, but no subtlety is expected. The intention of the writer can be perceived without excessive effort. Layout is generally appropriate but may show marked inconsistencies.	Use of language is in most respects appropriate to the task, and some adaptation of style to the particular context is demonstrated. The overall intention of the writer is clear. Layout, including handwriting, is generally appropriate.
<b>RANGE</b>	Severely limited range of expression is acceptable. Candidates may have laboured to fit what they want to say to what they are able to say.	A fair range of language is used. Candidates are able to express themselves without gross distortion.
<b>COMPLEXITY</b>	Texts may be simple showing little development. Simple sentences with little attempt at cohesion are acceptable.	Texts will display basic organisation with themes and topics linked in a simple way.

	Level 3	Level 4
<b>ACCURACY</b>	Good control of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. Any errors must not interface with communication.	Standards of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation are consistently of a very high level.
<b>APPROPRIACY</b>	Use of language is in almost all respects appropriate to the task. There is clear evidence of the ability to adapt style to the particular context. The intention of the writer, both overall and in detail, is generally clear. Layout, including handwriting, is generally appropriate.	Use of language is consistently appropriate to task, context and intention. Layout is consistent and appropriate. Handwriting does not interfere with communication.
<b>RANGE</b>	An extensive range of language is used. Candidates are able to express themselves clearly and without significant distortion.	Few limitations on the range of language available to candidates are apparent. There is no distortion of communication in order to fit known language.
<b>COMPLEXITY</b>	Texts can be organised with themes and topics appropriately linked and sequenced. There will be a clear structure to the text where appropriate.	There is clear and consistent evidence of the ability, to produce organised coherent and cohesive discourse where appropriate.